Learning and Doing Gender
Joan Z. Spade

We began this book by discussing the shaping of gender in Western and non-Western cultures. Part II expands on the idea of prisms by examining the patterns of gendered experiences that emerge from the practices of daily life and the interaction of gender with other socially constructed prisms. Patterns of individuals’ lives are influenced by gender and other social prisms, just as multiple patterns are created by the refraction of light as it travels through a kaleidoscope containing prisms.

Gendered Patterns

Social patterns are at the center of social scientists’ work. Michael Schwalbe (1998), a sociologist, defines social patterns as “a regularity in the way the world works” (p. 101). For example, driving down the “right” side of the street is a regularity American people appreciate. You will read about different gendered patterns in Part II, many of which are regularities you will find problematic because they deny the individuality of women and men. Clearly, there are exceptions to social patterns; however, these exceptions are in the details, not in the regularity of social behavior itself (Schwalbe, 1998). Patterns in society are not simple and are even contradicted by other patterns. We have rigid gender expectations for things such as which colors are appropriate for children, teens, and even adults. At the same time, we practice resistance to these patterns and fluidity in the way gender is displayed in daily life. For example, an upper-class man might feel comfortable wearing a pink polo shirt to a golf tournament but not so comfortable putting a ruffled pink shirt on his 2-year-old son.

A deeper understanding of how and why particular social patterns and practices exist helps us interpret our own behavior and the world around us. Gender, as we discussed in Part I, is not a singular pattern of masculinity or femininity that carries from one situation to another. Instead, it is complex, multifaceted, and ever changing, depending on the social context, whom we are with, and where we
are, as illustrated in the reading by Michela Musto in this chapter. Gender is also interpreted differently based on the community or group we associate with. That is, African American women are much less likely to adhere to idealized forms of gender or, as Karen D. Pyke and Denise L. Johnson labeled it in Chapter 2, hegemonic femininity—White, middle-class femininity. Our behavior in almost all situations is framed within our knowledge of idealized gender—hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Whether we resist or ridicule gender practices, we are almost always aware of them.

Keep the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity in mind as we examine social patterns of gender. To illustrate this, let’s return to the stereotype discussed in the introduction to this book—that women talk more than men. We know from research that the real social pattern in mixed-gender groups is that men talk more, interrupt more, and change the topic more often than do women (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Brescoli, 2011; Wood, 1999). The stereotype, while trivializing women’s talk and ignoring the dominance of men in mixed-gender groups, maintains the patterns of dominance and subordination associated with hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, influencing women’s as well as men’s behaviors. Girls—particularly White, middle-class girls—are encouraged to use a pleasant voice and not talk too much. Later, as they grow older and join mixed-gender groups at work or in play, women’s voices are often ignored and they are subordinated as they monitor what they say and how often they talk, checking to make sure they are not dominating the conversation. And since gender is relational, others learn that girls talk too much and should either shut up or speak in a “nice voice.” Gender is an ever-present force in defining daily behavior and is used in marketing to entice us to “buy into” gender as we purchase all kinds of products (Chapter 5). By examining how these idealized versions of masculinity and femininity pattern daily practices, we can better understand the patterns and meanings of our behavior and the behaviors of others.

Gendered patterns of belief and behavior influence us throughout our lives, from birth until old age, in almost every activity in which we engage. Readings in Part II examine the process and consequences of learning to do gender (Chapters 4 and 5) and then describe gendered patterns in work (Chapter 7) and in daily intimate relationships (Chapter 8). We also explore how gendered patterns affect our bodies, sexualities, and emotions (Chapter 6), and how patterns of dominance, control, and violence enforce gender patterns (Chapter 9).

The patterns that emerge from the gender kaleidoscope are not unique experiences in individual lives; they are regularities that occur in many people’s lives. They are not static patterns that remain the same across lifetimes or history, nor are they singular patterns with one and only one way of doing gender. Gendered patterns are many and fluid across time and space. If you don’t pay attention, gendered patterns may seem as though they are individual choices. Institutions and groups enforce gendered patterns and practices in the home, workplace, and daily life, as described in the readings throughout Part II. These patterns overlap and reinforce gender differences and inequalities. For example, gender discrimination in wages and promotions affects families’ decisions about parenting roles and relationships. Since most men still earn more than most women, the choices of families who wish to break away from idealized gender patterns and practices are limited by decisions surrounding household income. However, these patterns are complicated by intersections with race and social class, as you will see from the readings in Chapters 7 and 8.

**LEARNING AND DOING GENDER**

The readings in Chapter 4 examine the processes by which we acquire self-perceptions and behaviors and learn our culture’s expectations for idealized patterns of masculinities and femininities. These readings emphasize that, regardless of our
inability or unwillingness to attain idealized femininity and masculinity, almost everyone in a culture learns what idealized gender is and organizes their lives around those expectations, even if in resistance to them, as is the case of parents raising gender-variant children in the reading by Elizabeth P. Rahilly in this chapter. Of course, the genderscape is complex. While some people resist idealized gender and others try to ignore these signals, some communities develop alternatives to idealized gender, such as that in Irene Padavic and Jonniann Butterfield’s article on lesbian co-parenting in Chapter 8.

SOCIALIZING CHILDREN

There are many explanations for why children gravitate toward idealized gender-appropriate behavior. The term sociologists use to describe how we learn gender is gender socialization, and sociologists approach it from a variety of different perspectives (Coltrane, 1998). Socialization is the process of teaching members of a society the values, expectations, and practices of the larger culture. Socialization takes place in all interactions and situations, with families and schools typically having primary responsibility for socializing infants and children in Western societies. Early attempts to explain gender socialization gave little attention to the response of individuals to agents of socialization, such as parents, peers, and teachers, and to the influence of mass media and a consumer culture. There was an underlying assumption in this early perspective that individuals were blank tablets (tabulae rasae) on which the cultural definitions of idealized gender and other appropriate behaviors were written. This perspective assumed that, as individuals developed, they took on a gender identity appropriate to their assigned biological sex category (Howard & Alamilla, 2001). Accepting the gender that is associated with your sex assignment is referred to as cisgender.

Social scientists now realize that individuals are not blank tablets, that sex categories are not easily determined (see reading by Georgiann Davis and Sharon Preves in Chapter 1), and that gender socialization is not just something that is “done” to us. Theorists now describe socialization into gender as a series of complex and dynamic processes. Individuals create, as well as respond to, social stimuli in their environments (Carlton-Ford & Houston, 2001; Howard & Alamilla, 2001). Moreover, socialization doesn’t simply end after childhood. Socialization is a process that lasts across one’s lifetime, from birth to death (Lutfey & Mortimer, 2003), and occurs continually with everyone we interact with—friends, peers, coworkers, and acquaintances—as well as the environment around us, including mass media, as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Furthermore, there is a fluidity to gender ideology, with changes occurring across the life course, across race–gender categories (Vespa, 2009), and even across social contexts. For example, beauty means something different for a young child, teenager, or older person. Throughout our lives, we assess cues around us and behave as situations dictate. All socialization is, of course, reinforced by social institutions, as Barbara J. Risman discussed in the first reading in this book, and which we will discuss later in this introduction. Thus, whether we want it or not, idealized gender is a key factor in determining what is appropriate throughout our lives—even though few of us actually attain an idealized form of gender.

The dominant pattern of gender expectations, the pink and blue schema described in the introduction to this book (Paoletti, 2012), begins at birth. Once external genital identification takes place, immediate expectations for masculine and feminine behavior follow. Exclamations of “He’s going to be a great baseball (or football or soccer) player” and “She’s so cute” are accompanied by gifts of little sleepers in pink or blue with gender-appropriate decorations. Try as we might, it is very difficult to find gender-neutral clothing for children (see Adie Nelson’s article in Chapter 5). These expectations, and the way we treat young children, reinforce idealized gender constructions of dominance and subordination and illustrate how influential the role of
marketing and consumer culture is in defining idealized gender.

It is not long then, before most children come to understand that they should be “boys” and “girls,” and segregate themselves accordingly. These children learn their appropriate gender behavior (defined as cisgender in many studies). Family members are not alone in teaching children to behave as “good boys” or “good girls.” Almost every person a child comes into contact with and virtually all aspects of a child’s material world reinforce gender. In effect, children are taught that males and females are different and that they are expected to behave accordingly. In Chapter 5, you will read more about how capitalist societies reinforce and maintain gender difference and inequality for children and adults. Television, music, books, clothing, and toys differentiate and prescribe idealized gender behavior for girls and boys. For example, studies of children’s books find some distinctive patterns that reinforce idealized forms of gender. As Janice McCabe, Emily Fairchild, Liz Grauerholz, Bernice A. Pescosolido, and Daniel Tope discuss in their reading in this chapter, boys outnumber girls in books (titles and main characters) published across the 20th century. Although books continue to depict traditional gender patterns, on the plus side, researchers find that girls and women are more likely to be portrayed in gender-atypical roles in many recent children’s books (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Most children quickly understand the idealized gender-appropriate message directed toward them and try to behave accordingly. Although not all boys are dominant and not all girls are subordinate, studies in a variety of areas find that most White boys tend toward active and aggressive behaviors, while most White girls tend to be quieter and more focused on relationships. The patterning for African American boys is similar, and African American boys who do not act in gender-appropriate ways are seen as “soft” or feminine (Carter, 2005). These patterns for boys and girls have been documented in school and in play (e.g., Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Thorne, 1993).

It is important to note that the consequences for gender-appropriate behavior are not entirely positive. Gender-appropriate behavior is related to lower self-confidence and self-esteem for girls (e.g., Eder, 1995; Orenstein, 1994; Spade, 2001), whereas boys are taught to “mask” their feelings and compete with everyone for control, thus isolating themselves and ignoring their own feelings (e.g., Connell, 2000; Messner, 1992; Pollack, 2000).

**SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIALIZATION**

Many of our social institutions segregate children and adults by gender as well, thus creating gendered identities. All adults, not just parents, play a major role in teaching gender. Teachers also teach gender, and when they separate children into gender-segregated spaces in lunch lines or playground areas, they reinforce gender differences (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Thorne, 1993). However, teachers are becoming more aware of their role in gendering children and, in some contexts, such as the swimming team described in the reading by Musto in this chapter, the importance of gender can be made irrelevant by focusing on the task at hand. Yet, as shown in Musto’s reading, these lessons may not carry over to other contexts.

Schools, however, typically reinforce separate and unequal spheres for boys and girls (Orenstein, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Thorne, 1993). Considerable research by the American Association of University Women (1992, 1998, 1999) documents how schools “shortchange” girls. Schools are social institutions that maintain patterns of power and dominance. Indeed, we teach dominance in schools in patterns of teacher–student interactions such as respecting the responses of boys while encouraging girls to be helpers in the classroom (Grant, 1985; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). A study using data collected from individuals during their high school years (2002, 2004, and 2006) showed that gender socialization in schools varies based on the race of the student. For example, math teachers tend to hold a biased perception of girls’ abilities,
particularly when comparing the abilities of White girls with those of White boys (Riegle-Crumb & Humphries, 2012). The reading by Maria Charles in this chapter describes how schools reinforce choices related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), eventually solidifying the gender segregation of STEM careers. Unfortunately, gender socialization and expectations continue well into the STEM careers, with some women scientists enforcing gender norms and expectations by distancing themselves from femininity and “typical feminine practices” as other women fight gender discrimination (Rhoton, 2011). Thus, according to Laura A. Rhoton, women scientists prefer to associate with females who act the role of “scientist” rather than with females who practice femininity, further reinforcing the perception of appropriate gender in science. And, unfortunately, this climate of gender difference and inequality persists in the workplace, as you will read about in the readings Chapter 7.

One very obvious example of institutions separating gender and socializing children differently is the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. These are two prominent social institutions organized to socialize children. A controversy occurred in 2012 as to whether to allow a transgendered boy who identified as a girl into the Girl Scouts, challenging formerly rigid gender categorizations used to group children. Despite the absurdity of trying to separate genders in a world with more gender fluidity, the Girl Scout and Boy Scout organizations still socialize children in gender-specific ways. Boy Scouts are more likely to offer science-based activities and less likely to offer art activities than are the Girl Scouts (Denny, 2011). While the Girl Scouts promote what Denny calls an image of the “up-to-date traditional woman” for young girls, with an emphasis on communal activities, Boy Scout badges are given for activities, with a general focus on ability and assertiveness (Denny, 2011). By creating these separate spaces with very different expectations for boys and girls, we are socializing our children in gender difference and inequality. Today, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, as well as other same-sex/gender organizations such as same-sex/gender colleges and same-sex/gender teams, are struggling with changing their “rules” to be more flexible in their definitions of sex/gender and more accepting of transgendered people.

However, not all boys and men are allowed to be dominant across settings (Eder, 1995), and few girls come close to achieving idealized femininity. Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) describes how schools discourage African American boys from claiming their Blackness and masculinity. Although White boys may be allowed to be “rambunctious” and disrespectful, African American boys are punished more severely than their White peers when they “act out,” and there is less tolerance for African American boys who try to dominate. Girls also exist within a hierarchy of relationships (Eder, 1995). Girls from racial, ethnic, economically disadvantaged, or other subordinated groups must fight even harder to succeed under multiple systems of domination and inequality in schools. To illustrate this point, Julie Bettie (2002) compared the paths to success for upwardly mobile White and Mexican American high school girls and found some similarities in gender experiences at home and school, such as participation in sports, which facilitated mobility for both groups of girls. But, there were also differences in their experiences because race was always salient and was a barrier for the Mexican American girls. However, Bettie believes that achieving upward mobility may have been easier for these Mexican American girls than for their brothers because it is easier for girls to transgress gender boundaries. Their brothers, on the other hand, felt pressure to “engage in the rituals of proving masculinity” even though this behavior was rejected by those in control at school (p. 419).

Bettie’s (2002) study emphasizes the fact that multiple social prisms of difference and inequality create an array of patterns, which would not be possible if gender socialization practices were singular or universal. Individuals’ lives are constructed around many factors, including gender. Cultural values and expectations influence, and frequently contradict, the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity in
Western societies. Pyke and Johnson’s reading in Chapter 2 and other readings throughout this book illustrate how the practice of gender is strongly influenced by culture. The process of gender socialization is rooted in the principle that girls/women and boys/men are not equal and that the socially constructed categories of difference and inequality (gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, age, culture, etc.) are legitimate.

Sports, particularly organized sports, provide other examples of how institutionalized activities reinforce the gender identities children learn. Boys learn the meaning of competition and success, including the idea that winning is everything (e.g., Messner, 1992). Girls, on the other hand, are more often found on the edges of the playing field, or on the sides of the playground, watching the boys (Thorne, 1993). And, as you will read in Chapter 9, moms are typically relegated to the sidelines as well, while men coach. Even though girls are more involved in playing sports than in previous generations, Matthew B. Ezzell, in his reading in this chapter, describes a climate in which females are still expected to maintain some level of femininity during athletic competitions. Yet not all children play in the same ways. Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1990) finds that children from urban, lower-class, high-density neighborhoods—where households are closer together—are more likely to play in mixed-gender and mixed-age groups. In suburban, middle-class households, which are farther apart than urban households, parents are more likely to drive their children to sporting activities or houses to play with same-sex/gender, same-age peers. The consequences of social class and place of residence are that lower-class children are more comfortable with their sexuality as they enter preadolescence and are less likely to gender segregate in school (Goodwin, 1990).

Sports and play continue to segregate us and define gender throughout our lives. Although the formal rules for women’s and men’s rugby are the same, the reading by Ezzell in this chapter illustrates how adult women pressure themselves and other women to perform emphasized femininity, even when playing by the same game rules as do men. Although women are increasingly participating in traditionally “male” sports activities, the gendered nature of these sports still exists in the institutions supporting the activities (Buysse & Embser-Herbert, 2004), the game rules, and the minds of the participants, even in traditionally “male” sports such as basketball (Berlage, 2004), ice hockey (Theberge, 2000), and body building (Wesely, 2001). Socialization into gender does not stop at any particular age but occurs throughout our lifetimes and throughout our activities.

**Gender Transgressions**

Change in social expectations comes slowly, but today there is more acceptance of individuals who do not accept or feel comfortable in the gender appropriate for their assigned sex, such as Bruce Jenner, the former Olympian and reality show star who feels more comfortable as a woman, Caitlyn. Rahilly addresses this issue in her piece in this chapter, which focuses on parents who are raising children who refuse to align their genders with expectations for behavior appropriate to their assigned sex. While all this attention to transgender might seem like a breakthrough for creating more flexibility in the hold gender has on our life choices, the acceptance of transgender may not be breaking down the gender binary. Instead, Eleanor Burkett (2015) asks in a *New York Times* editorial whether Bruce Jenner’s coming out as a woman, Caitlyn, further reinforces the stereotypes and a gender binary. In fact, Jenner’s public transgender event may be making those “tidy boxes” of boys/men and girls/women much more rigid as Bruce went from a man who was a star athlete to Caitlyn, a voluptuous woman laid out neatly and passively on the cover of *Vanity Fair.*

Although there is an increasing acceptance of transgendered people, beginning in the early 2000s, there still occurs what Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt (2014) call “gender panics,” when people’s assumptions about biology-based gender ideology are disrupted. Using newspaper
articles to determine how the press and public responded to such disruptions, they examined press reports of several events, including the move by New York City to allow individuals to change the sex listed on their birth certificates without requiring proof of genital reconstruction (a biological change that corresponded with their new sex identification). They also examined articles relating to competitive sports and workplace discrimination. They concluded that people were more likely to require biology-based criteria for gender if the activity was sex-segregated, particularly if the requirements protected females in female spaces from males or trans women who may still have some male biological sex characteristics. In sex-segregated competitive sports, however, identity-based definitions of gender were less likely to be accepted and, trans women who want to compete in women’s competitions are more likely to have biological markers that indicate they are female, such as genital reconstruction and/or testosterone levels similar to females. However, in workplace discrimination, a space that is not sex-segregated, they found there is more acceptance of an identity-based definition of gender. These gender panics, as Westbrook and Schilt (2014) call them, are not new; rather, they are just becoming more apparent and a bit more complicated by the acceptance of identity-based markers of gender as opposed to biological markers.

Until recently, most persons who went through sex change operations were referred to as transsexuals. Yet, even with the appropriate biological markers, the transition from one gender to another was not necessarily easy. Renée Richards, who in 1975 underwent sex reassignment surgery at the age of 40, was initially denied a spot in the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament in 1977 because she wasn’t really a woman. That decision was reversed and she was allowed to compete in professional women’s tennis. This change in terminology over time reflects an acknowledgment of the powerful force of social factors in determining our gender identities and moves away from the idea that gender is an essential part of our biological nature.

While most children learn to display idealized gender behaviors, at times we all step out of gender-appropriate zones in our daily lives. Girls and women are more likely to transgress and do masculine things than boys and men are to participate in feminine activities. C. Shawn McGuffey and B. Lindsay Rich (1999) find that girls who transgress into the “boys’ zone” may eventually be respected by their male playmates if they are good at conventionally male activities, such as playing baseball. Boys, however, are harassed and teased when they try to participate in any activity associated with girls (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). By denying boys access to girls’ activities, the dominance of masculinity is reinforced as when boys are ridiculed because they are not sufficiently dominant or because they “throw like a girl.” Therefore, boys reinforce and maintain masculinity by goading one another to perform “manhood acts” (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009), and we all end up devaluing feminine acts.

As you can see, learning gender is complicated. Clearly, gender is something that we “do” as much as learn, and in doing gender, we are responding to structured expectations from institutions in society as well as interpersonal cues from those we are interacting with. Throughout our lives, every time we enter a new social situation, we look around for cues and guides to determine how to behave in an appropriate manner. In some situations we might interpret gender cues as calling for a high degree of idealized gender difference and inequality, while in other situations the clues allow us to be more flexible. Thus, we create gender as well as respond to expectations for it. And we change gender when we resist it!

DOING MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES

Most men have learned to “do” the behaviors that maintain hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time suppressing feelings and behaviors
that might make them seem feminine (Connell, 1987). As a result, being a “man” or a “woman” requires an awareness of and responses to the other gender. Our cues and behaviors change whether we are responding to someone we identify as being of the same gender or of a different gender. That is, masculinities or femininities are enacted based on how those we are interacting with are displaying femininities or masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

As argued, hegemonic masculinity is maintained in a hierarchy in which only a few men achieve close-to-idealized masculinity, with everyone else subordinated to them—women, poor White men, men of color, gay men, and men from devalued ethnic and religious groups. Furthermore, this domination is not always one-on-one but, rather, can be institutionalized in the structure of the situation. As you read the articles in this chapter, you will see that gender is not something we learn once, in one setting. Instead, we learn to do gender over time in virtually everything we undertake. And, although we do gender throughout our lives, we rarely achieve idealized gender; yet, by doing gender, we continue to maintain a system of gender difference and inequality. Also, remember that learning to “do” gender is complicated by the other prisms that interact in our lives. Recall the lessons from Chapter 2 and remember that gender does not stand alone but, rather, is reflected in other social identities.

It is not easy to separate the learning and doing of gender from other patterns. As you read selections in other chapters in Part II of this book, you will see the influence of social processes and institutions on how we learn and do gender across all aspects of our lives. Before you start to read, ask yourself how you learned gender and how well you do it. Not succeeding at doing gender is normal. That is, if we all felt comfortable with ourselves, no one would be striving for idealized forms of gender—hegemonic masculinity or emphasized femininity. Imagine a world in which we all feel comfortable just the way we are! As you read through the rest of this book, ask yourself why that world doesn’t exist.

**REFERENCES**


Introduction to Reading 16

Parents play a major role in socializing young children into appropriate genders, the genders that match the sexes assigned to them at birth. Males become boys and females become girls,
by learning to present themselves in appropriate ways such that others recognize their gender. An individual whose gender and sex align is referred to as cisgender. However, not every child wants to be socialized into their “appropriate” gender. Elizabeth P. Rahilly addresses this issue, focusing on parents who are raising children who refuse to align their genders with expectations for behavior appropriate to their assigned sex. She conducted interviews with 24 parents of 16 gender-variant children. These parents are predominantly White, middle class, and well educated. In this reading she describes the strategies parents developed to deal with their children’s gender variance, with most of their attention focused on the people their children interacted with. She recruited these parents at a support conference for parents of gender-variant children and also from an Internet blog that one of the parents in her study authored. This research provides an interesting glimpse at parenting against the norm.

1. How did the parents respond to their children’s desire to be gender variant?

2. What role did outsiders play in the way parents managed the gender variance of their children?

3. In accepting the gender variance of their children, are these parents still upholding the “truth regime” of a gender binary?

THE GENDER BINARY MEETS THE GENDER-VARIANT CHILD: PARENTS’ NEGOTIATIONS WITH CHILDHOOD GENDER VARIANCE

Elizabeth P. Rahilly

Tristan’s just everything, he’s not limited, and I think part of it is that gender thing, there’s no boxes for him . . . I just want to keep it that way, I don’t want the world to crush him.

—Shella1

Transgender identity has long been significant in sociocultural analyses of gender (Bornstein 1995; Halberstam 2005). Gender variance exposes the limits of the gender binary and the overly deterministic role it ascribes to assigned sex, in turn signaling possibilities for social change against dominant ideologies and practices. Pursuant to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) canonical distinctions between sex, sex category, and gender, several empirical studies have addressed trans persons’ experiences to illuminate the logics of the gender binary, both when it prevails and when it is troubled (Connell 2010; Gagne and Tewksbury 1998; Jenness and Fenstermaker 2014; Schilt and Westbrook 2009). As crucial as these studies are to a sociology of

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gender, their principal substrate for analysis has been adult experiences and perspectives. Save Tey Meadow’s research (2011, 2013), childhood gender variance is largely absent from the empirical repertoire. Only recently has the prospect of raising children as categorically “gender-variant” or “transgender” surfaced on the cultural landscape.

Over the last decade, preadolescent gender-variant children have garnered widespread visibility, beyond the walls of the “medicopsychological” clinic, where much of the research on, and management of, childhood gender variance traditionally has occurred (Bryant 2006). These children’s behaviors consistently and significantly stray from the expectations of their assigned sex—from the clothes, toys, and play groups they prefer to their repeated articulations about their sense of self (e.g., “I’m your son, not your daughter!”). This visibility is due in no small part to the parents who raise these children and reject traditional reparative interventions (e.g., Green 1987; Zucker 2008). An increasing number of mental health practitioners reject reparative approaches as well (Ehrensaft 2011; Lev 2004).

This article draws on interview data with 24 parents of gender-variant children, who represent 16 childhood cases altogether and are part of a larger longitudinal project on parents of gender-variant and transgender children. I examine three practices—“gender hedging,” “gender literacy,” and “playing along”—to illuminate the ways in which these parents come to an awareness of the gender binary as a limited cultural ideology, or a “truth regime” (Foucault 2000), and in turn devise various practical and discursive strategies to navigate that regime and accommodate their children’s nonconformity. These parents widen the options their children have, not only regarding interests and activities, as conventional “gender-neutral” parenting would advocate, but also with regard to a potentially transgender sense of self. They also adhere to essentialist understandings of gender identity and expression, in ways that expand, rather than limit, the range of gendered possibilities. Altogether, these families are inventing a new mode of social response to a problem that would, in previous decades, be the province of psychotherapeutic intervention and exposing new challenges to the gender binary during early childhood development.

Parenting and Gender: The Gender “Truth Regime”

Following her work on “transgender families,” Pfeffer (2012) called for more concerted research into “the increasingly diverse family forms of the twenty-first century,” whose members expose new strategies for negotiating and resisting gender norms (Pfeffer 2012, 596). Meadow’s (2011, 2013) ethnography offered some of the first insights into a new generation of parents who are raising transgender children. Meadow found that parents drew on traditional explanatory tropes—including biomedical, psychiatric, and spiritual—to explain their child’s gender-variant “self” to others, thereby “assimilat[ing] their children’s atypical identities into familiar knowledge and belief systems” (Meadow 2011, 728). Meadow argues that these traditional frameworks bear as much potential for embracing non-normative genders as they do for constricting them. I build on this budding sociological terrain, turning my focus to specific methods and strategies parents develop in everyday interactions to navigate the gender binary, starting with their initial reckonings with the gender binary as faulty cultural ideology.

Of course, parents’ potential to challenge the gender binary is not new. Attendant with ideological aspects of second-wave feminism, many scholars have been interested in parenting practices that resist stereotyping male and female children, often referred to as “gender-neutral” or “feminist” parenting (Bem 1983; Pogrebin 1980; Risman and Meyers 1997; Statham 1986). Both Kane (2006) and Martin (2005), however, have noted the limited legacy of such parenting ideals, which they attribute to negative cultural associations between childhood gender nonconformity and adult
homosexuality, fostering parents’ maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity. More recently, Kane (2012) revealed a range of tendencies among contemporary parents, from those who presume stereotypical gender behaviors in their children to those who consciously seek to widen their children’s social options. Nonetheless, Kane observed that almost all parents succumb to the “gender trap,” or social expectations that limit parents’ best intentions against the binary (Kane 2012, 3). Even the most progressively minded parents in Kane’s sample still felt accountable to a modicum of gender normativity in public, especially with their sons. And few, if any of them, seemed cognizant of the prospect of a transgender child. Indeed, one of the parents in Kane’s sample—who chased down a store clerk when the clerk assumed her boys would not use glitter in a crafts project—easily dismissed the notion that her three-year-old son would grow up to be a “girl”: “So I said, ‘Eli, you’ll never be a girl, but if you want that Barbie pool you can have it’” (Kane 2012, 150). As traditionally conceived, gender-progressive parenting encouraged boys and girls to be whatever they wanted to be, regardless of stereotypes—but they were ever and always (cisgender3) boys and girls, respectively.

In this article, the “gender binary” refers to a dominant cultural presumption about sex and gender: namely, that there is an expected “congruent” relationship between one’s sexed body and their gender identity and expression—that is, babies assigned “male” grow up to be “boys” and babies assigned “female” grow up to be “girls,” and without many options in between. I use “male” and “female” to refer to the sexual anatomy that is coded at birth, and “boy” and “girl” to refer to the gender identities that are presumed of bodies assigned as such. Many parents no longer expect stereotypically “masculine” and “feminine” behaviors from their children—and often laud a child for stepping outside these in certain respects (e.g., boys who exhibit sensitivity, girls who prefer sports to Barbies). However, the presumption that a child’s assigned sex will predict and circumscribe their gendered sensibilities and identities (“boy” or “girl”) still holds force in our culture. The first question that is asked after a child is born is the first of many iterations of this belief system, around which myriad institutions and practices are arranged. . . .

I employ the concept of “truth regime” to analyze the practical, discursive, and intellectual strategies these parents engage in to navigate the gender binary and legitimize childhood gender-variant subjectivities. The power of the gender truth regime lies in its erasure of childhood transgender possibilities; children assigned male who present as “girls” and children assigned female who present as “boys” are culturally unintelligible. And the parents who permit such possibilities are implicated negatively by others, including neighbors, doctors, teachers, and extended family, who might question the apparent “mismatch” (especially if they were aware of the assigned sex). I draw on the concept of “truth regime” to examine these parents’ newfound negotiations with, and increasing resistance to, the gender binary in the face of its regulatory effects, particularly during everyday discursive interactions.

The “truth regime” framework intersects with the “doing gender” approach. The dictates of the gender truth regime powerfully inform interactional practices, to which parents at first feel accountable. However, parents’ growing awareness of the falsehoods of the gender binary enables “redoing gender” (West and Zimmerman 2009), or “doing gender differently” (Dalton and Fenstermaker 2002), through which alternative gender practices become possible. Rather than “undoing gender” altogether, parents still attribute gendered meaning to their children’s preferences—they are atypically masculine or feminine, but masculine and feminine nonetheless. I use the term “truth regime” to emphasize the discursive and ideological foundations of the gender binary that parents work to resist, through which changes to the system of normative gender accountability might transpire.

As I demonstrate, parents’ strategies emerge in response to children’s demands and preferences,
and not necessarily due to a “gender-neutral” agenda of their own. This child-directed dynamic speaks to more general “bidirectional” or “reciprocal influence” theories of childhood socialization (Coltrane and Adams 1997; Peterson and Rollins 1987), in which both parents and children are seen as active agents in the progress.

* * *

CHALLENGING THE GENDER TRUTH REGIME

By the time they enter parenthood, many adults have internalized a dominant cultural ideology that presumes a deterministic relationship between sex and gender; “males” are boys and “females” are girls. But the parents in this study confront the limits of these “certainties” in the face of their children’s persistent gender-variant preferences and expressions. In this section, I describe three major practices that surfaced in parents’ narratives: “gender hedging,” “gender literacy,” and “playing along.” Through these practices, parents come to an awareness of the gender binary as a restrictive truth regime, and work to carve out more inclusive understandings of, and practices around, gender nonconformity, despite a world that is largely ignorant of childhood transgender possibilities.

Gender Hedging: “Walking the Fine Line” of the Gender Binary

When referring to the early stages of their parenting careers, before they grew cognizant of the prospect of a “gender-variant” or “transgender” child, almost all parents described engaging in a kind of boundary work with their children’s “atypical” behaviors, especially as the child approached school age. I refer to this work as “gender hedging,” or parents’ creative efforts to curb their child’s nonconformity and stay within gender-normative constraints. A parent purchases pink socks for their “son,” for example, but not a skirt. I introduce gender hedging as parents’ first strategic negotiations with the gender truth regime, as it marks a crucial phase in their developing consciousness about this dominant belief system: gender proves as much a set of cultural dictates to which parents feel beholden as it does a given “truth” about their child’s sex, which offers little reference for their child’s persistent preferences and behaviors. While gender hedging largely upholds the gender truth regime, as parents work to fashion an overall front of normativity (e.g., no dresses at the store), it also permits small concessions to a child’s gender variant interests (e.g., a pink shirt is okay), and stirs parents’ questioning about how much of these they should regulate and restrain, if at all.

When I asked parents to orient me to their child’s gender nonconformity, they listed a variety of activities their child engaged in, often starting around the age of two, that were the stereotypical stock of the “other sex’s” interests and preferences, including toys, clothing, types of play, and friend groups. Tim, for example, adored playing dress-up in an Ariel mermaid costume (which Beth purchased for him after he repeatedly begged for it at the store), which came complete with jewelry and high heels. However, the outfit proved “too much” for Beth and Barry to accept, and lines were drawn regarding the extent to which Tim could wear it: The dress was allowed, but not the accessories, and only indoors. Tim also wanted to carry a purse in public. Beth offered him a “substitute”; she gave him a small boutique shopping bag with handles instead of a woman’s handbag, so as to be less conspicuous. Beth described such efforts as a “daily tightrope walk” and “a fine line that [they] walk.”

Katy also remembered trying to accommodate her child’s preferences for girly clothes in public: “He started wearing some feminine stuff, [at the store] I’d pick out, okay, it’s not pink but it’s got Hello Kitty on it, that’ll be okay, you know.” Theresa recalled her efforts to “soft pedal” around Lisa’s girliness in one emblematic move: when Lisa started kindergarten, Theresa made an interactive chart with popsicle sticks
designating the kinds of daily attire Lisa could wear to school. On some days, Lisa could wear more feminine clothes (skorts—half shorts, half skirt); on others, she had to wear boy clothes (pants). Now, Theresa cringes at the thought of it, but at the time, she felt she had to “enforce a balance . . . not to go all the way into girly-girly land.” . . .

Parents, in both male and female cases, also expressed fear about their child’s risk of bullying and exclusion, which largely compelled their early efforts to keep the nonconformity at bay and indoors.

Notably, Kane (2006, 2012) described similar kinds of “boundary maintenance” among the parents she studied, who allowed gender-atypical play indoors but ensured gender-normative presentations in public, especially with male children. However, the parents in this study eventually allowed children assigned male access to proverbial “icons of femininity” (Kane 2006), including frilly skirts and dresses outside of the house, and long hair. With children assigned female, parents obliged more and more clothing from the boys’ department and short haircuts. Moreover, these parents mentioned what their children said (i.e., “I’m your son, not your daughter!” or “I feel more like a girl than a boy”) as much as what they did or liked, and the significance attributed to these verbal declarations cannot be underestimated. These parents would argue that their child’s repeated self-identifications are what set them apart from other children who “just” prefer occasional gender-atypical activities (and whose parents permit this).7

Interestingly enough, in a quarter of the cases, parents confessed to cloaking their regulation of certain behaviors in excuses that did not have to do with gender: Molly told Gil that his clothing preferences were too “sloppy,” versus too masculine for a little girl, which she now recognizes was her “ulterior motive.” Beth gave Tim’s favorite dress-up heels to the dog so she didn’t have to tell him they didn’t want him wearing them. Theresa routinely framed pants as more comfortable for playtime with peers, versus more appropriate for boys. Parents’ rhetorical moves to hide the true motives of their gender hedging are perhaps the most intriguing element of the practice: While parents felt bound to conform, they sought to avoid teaching that conformity explicitly to their children.

Parents’ strategic work in gender hedging makes them increasingly frustrated with the regulatory forces of the gender truth regime, which presumes certain behaviors and dispositions relative to particular sex categories but which do not align with those of their children, time and again. In attempting to comply with the regime and not “bother other people”—including, fundamentally, protecting their children from negative attention—parents devise a variety of crafty maneuvers to satisfy their child’s preferences while staying just within binary limits, but these continue to belie what their children really want. As Carl relayed, “We saw him when he was being pushed into, because of our own ignorance, a gender that wasn’t his to accept . . . he would push back and [say], ‘I’m not doing that.’” These tiresome negotiations ultimately catalyze their search for insights online, where they encounter a body of trans-affirming discourses that radically shift their perceptions about gender.

Gender Literacy: Talking Back to the Gender Binary

Parents’ encounters on the Internet usher in a new stage of consciousness about childhood gender nonconformity, which challenges their attempts to curb it and breeds a new set of strategies. These strategies manifest in the form of explicit dialogues and discourse, with their children and with others, about more expansive (trans)gender possibilities than the gender truth regime allows. Through their online searches, parents find a flurry of talk among other parents, professionals, advocates, blogs, listservs, and advocacy organizations about gender-variant and transgender children. In these virtual forums—which often lead to live support groups and conferences with other parents—gender variance is affirmed as a natural, normal part of human 

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diversity. Longstanding cultural beliefs rooted in the gender binary are the problem, as represented in the following excerpt from one prominent advocacy organization: “When a child is born, a quick glance between the legs determines the gender label that the child will carry for life. But . . . a binary concept still fails to capture [that] . . . biological gender occurs across a continuum of possibilities” (Gender Spectrum, n.d.). This discursive community also asserts that gender and sexuality are “separate, distinct parts of our overall identity” and that “gender expression should not be viewed as an indication of sexual orientation” (Gender Spectrum, n.d.). This distinction reverberated, often passionately, in my interviews. Tellingly, a striking majority of parents also volunteered awareness that their child could be both “trans and gay” as adults (the two adolescents in the sample, for example, transgender boys, identified as “gay” and “bi” at the time of our interviews). Parents’ affirmation of their children’s nonconformity as a matter of gender, and not (homo)sexuality, surfaced as a key component of the newfound transgender-aware principles they espoused.

During our interviews, it became apparent that parents sought to reiterate these discourses within their homes. Parents frequently recounted conversations with their children in which they aimed to pass on a more inclusive, less binary understanding of gender. I refer to these efforts as “gender literacy,” which I adapt from France Winndance Twine’s (2010) work on “racial literacy.”

One aspect of gender literacy entails parents’ efforts to equip their children with a simple vocabulary for explaining their nonconformity to peers. Laurie said, “We would have to coach him on the kinds of responses to have to other kids . . . [he says] he’s a boy who likes feminine things.” Similarly, Heather claimed, “We kind of say together . . . You’re always gonna be a girl in your heart.” Both Molly and Lynne said that prior to their children’s transitions they used the phrase “boy with a girl’s body.” Katy actually tried defining “transgender,” “gender-variant,” and “inter-sex” for Liam, because she thought these might resonate with how he feels. While Katy worried that these terms were too complicated for Liam, they signify her enduring attempts to provide a language in her home that normalizes gender variance. In contrast, Becca and Sara preferred using labels their children derived themselves. Becca, who adopted her child’s coinage “boygir,” exemplified this philosophy: “One of the things I’ve really had to struggle with . . . is the labeling . . . We’re just trying to put our own experiences around it . . . [but] I want him to define himself.” Here, Becca testifies not only to the child-directed nature of this process (parents defer to their children’s self-conceptions) but to the intellectual work she does to deconstruct conventional “truths” about sex and gender, including their categorical referents, that she has internalized.

Another facet of this strategy is parents’ warning their children about prejudice toward gender nonconformity, similar to the “preparation for bias” that racial socialization scholars have observed among parents and children of color (Hughes et al. 2006). Ally, for example, believes that she has to be candid with Ray about potential harassment from peers: “I think that was how I explained it to him early on was, there are some people . . . who are gonna be really mean, ’cause they don’t understand that . . . boys can wear girly clothes, play with girly toys.” Tracy compared the importance of these lessons to dialoguing about racism: “I still think that we have to talk openly about what society is gonna expect because I think, just like with racism . . . ignoring race and pretending it doesn’t exist is . . . not helpful to children.”

Parents also strive to articulate trans-inclusive understandings of bodies and gender. Sam, for example, recalled making the following “edits” for Jamie when the topic of bodies appeared in a children’s book: “I’d say, ‘Nearly all girls’ bodies are like this and nearly all boys’ bodies are like that’ . . . I [told him] that there are some people whose bodies don’t match up with the genital parts that you traditionally associate.” Tracy said that when her children use public restrooms, she will ask them which bathroom
someone would use who does not identify as man or woman, “just to kind of plant the seed [that] it doesn’t have to be one or the other.” Moreover, in half of the preadolescent cases, parents indicated that they made their children aware, in the simplest terms possible, that there are “drugs,” “medication,” and/or “surgeries” that can help with body change in the future, when such questions surfaced (Liam, for example, expressed interest in having breasts “like his Mommy’s”). These are striking examples of parents’ attempts to actively affirm transgender and transsexual subjectivities during early childhood, versus regurgitating the body logics of the gender truth regime (i.e., “You can’t have breasts like your Mommy’s, you’re a boy”).

Parents engage their gender-normative children in gender literacy as well. For example, when their younger son, Eddy, asked them if Liam identifies as a boy or girl, Katy and Brian responded, “Well, sometimes Liam doesn’t know, and sometimes Liam feels like a girl, and sometimes Liam feels like a boy, and that’s okay . . . how do you feel on the inside?” As a testament to the gender-progressive potential of these strategies, Eddy wore a skirt to school over his shorts so that he could tell his friends, “Boys can wear skirts [too].” Clarise described her youngest child, who is six, as the one who “gets it” the best: “[She] gets that there’s all kinds of varieties of gender . . . because it’s always been that way for her.” The gender literacy in which parents engage all of their children is indicative of how the presumptions of the gender truth regime are being radically resisted and retold in these families.

Parents practice gender literacy in more public institutions, too, including their children’s schools. Parents work with teachers and administrators to coordinate gender-inclusiveness training, as well as to draft school policies that specifically protect “gender identity and/or expression.” Carl joined an organization that teaches LGBT awareness to religious bodies in his community: “I wouldn’t [have] done it if it weren’t for Mark . . . I don’t want him growing up in an environment that doesn’t accept him.” Several parents also launched online blogs detailing their experiences. Alicia reflected, “[Parents are] starting to move into an advocacy role, so they’re wanting to include the general public in these discussions . . . parents are looking to have a voice.” . . .

“Playing Along” (or Not): “Head Games” With the Gender Binary

While parents enact multiple forms of “gender literacy” to challenge the gender truth regime, they also feel that not every instance is appropriate for, or receptive to, such explicit deconstructionist efforts. This proved particularly true for interactions with strangers, who often attribute the wrong gender to a child (for example, at the grocery store, someone refers to a gender-variant male child as a “beautiful little girl”). . . . During such interactional routines, parents confront the power effects of the gender truth regime and must manage others’ normative assumptions about sex and gender vis-à-vis their gender-variant children. Becca described these encounters as a “head game”: “Up until this point, I have a little boy, and I know what’s going on with my little boy, but [then] . . . suddenly, it’s like I have to think of this as like having a little girl, which is its own . . . head game.” . . . Parents advised that “playing along,” as it was often described to me, was the most appropriate strategy with people whom they were unlikely to see again, when candid lessons about gender variance felt inapt: “In the interest of just keeping . . . the social construct together, I went with it, and I was just, like, whatever, I’m not in a space to educate” (Becca). Moreover, most children ask their parents not to correct strangers in these instances (such early requests are often regarded as indicative of a transgender identity later on). While “playing along” may not rupture the “social construct” for parents’ interlocutors—and I seek to emphasize parents’ heightened awareness that the construct exists—this strategy permits gender-variant expressions in public in a way that the norms of a child’s assigned sex would disallow. Parents’ decisions to honor their
children’s requests and “play along” with strangers thus affords their children safety and privacy that more explicit kinds of “gender literacy” might make uncomfortable. Indeed, many parents adopt the perspective that what their child has “between their legs” is nobody’s business and irrelevant to their preferred gender presentation. Theresa reflected on these early negotiations: “She did start saying, ‘Don’t tell anybody I’m a boy’ . . . I realize now that I was very anxious to take care of [other people], how do I help people to understand . . . What I’m really trying to figure out [is] how to protect her privacy and still run interference.” In short, playing along and not saying anything, versus effectively revealing their child’s assigned sex to strangers, proved an important discursive practice in its own right to accommodate their children’s most comfortable self-expressions, particularly for gender-variant children who had not claimed a binary identity.

When it comes to people parents see more frequently, “playing along” feels less viable. Beth claimed, “I felt the need to explain it to acquaintances and friends . . . you see the parents every day at drop-off . . . so I did feel the need to say, ‘He prefers girl stuff.’” Here, Beth seeks to mediate between her child’s apparent nonconformity (the boy who likes the girly toys and dress-up at school) and others’ potential scrutiny, in turn signaling her own allowances of these preferences. Parents’ discursive interventions in more familiar contexts, versus staying silent, work to carve out space for gender nonconformity where it might be otherwise inhibited. Disclosure is also important when parents fear their child’s safety and well-being is at stake. Theresa, for instance, advised the host parent of a girls-only slumber party that her daughter was transgender, just in case her status was revealed by a potential “wild card” from her old school. Parents’ use of terms like “playing along,” “head game,” and “wild card” are duly reflective of the strategic awareness they have developed to navigate the gender truth regime in everyday life, protecting and accommodating their children in the most appropriate ways they see fit with different audiences.

In contrast to the logics of the gender truth regime, parents adopt new ideologies that imagine a wider “spectrum” of (trans)gender possibilities, which are not moored to two, static sex categories. Shella reflected, “It’s amazing to watch somebody really be strong in who they are to try and tackle something huge, because okay, you’re born with a penis, okay, you’re a boy, boom, done—NO, not necessarily.” Ally reiterated this perspective: “You wanna call somebody with a penis ‘male’? Yeah, talk to the hyenas.”8 Alongside this de-linking of sex and gender, parents discussed more fluid, nonbinary identities, which Ally mused about as “a whole ’nother space that doesn’t have to be just girl, just boy.” Katy also mentioned a desire to “[go] beyond the binary” and advocate for the “boy in the skirt.” This kind of intellectual work is particularly important for parents whose children had not articulated a binary identity (boy or girl), but were more fluid or switched their expressions day-to-day.

As parents reject traditional binary beliefs for a more spectrum-oriented perspective, they also embrace the idea that we are “born” with our gender, that it is an innate, “immutable” part of us. Several of the mothers in my study—self-proclaimed feminists who came of age during the 1970s—advised that having a gender-variant child has made them rethink the constructionist beliefs they adopted during second-wave feminism. Laurie typified this attitude:

Having grown up with this sort of . . . feminist attitude . . . I grew up in the ’70s, the free-to-be-you-and-me generation . . . and I always thought that we could choose our gender expression, and I didn’t realize until I had a kid that gender expression or gender identity is just this immutable part of you, like the color of your skin, or any other fixed part of you.

Similarly, Brian asserted that gender variance stems “from the first duplication of those cells . . . this is how they’re made.” Joe raised the possibility of genetic or hormonal factors: “It’s got to be either in vitro [uterus] or hormonal . . . or may be there’s some gene . . . there seems to be a
gene that causes everything else.” For these parents, only an innate hard-wiring during fetal development, or a “core biology,” could explain a child’s gender (variance) that resisted all cues to normative socialization. Evidently, these parents reconceive of gender in ways that harness both essentialist and constructionist frameworks. They reject the conventional sex-based assumptions of the gender truth regime, which they now see as hardly representative of the various ways masculinity and femininity manifest in the human population. Simultaneously, they embrace gender variance as a matter of “natural” human variation, often literally at the genomic or cellular level. In imagining “beyond the binary,” these parents do not abandon the essentialist underpinnings of normative gender ideology.

* * *

NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. “Gender-variant” serves as an umbrella term for all the children represented in this study, whose behaviors are considered significantly more masculine or more feminine relative to their assigned sex. When referring to individual cases, I use “transgender” to refer to a child who had a “cross-gender” identity (i.e., transgender girls who were assigned male at birth and transgender boys who were assigned female). For children who did not identify with one specific gender, I refer to their assigned sex to signal their gender variance (i.e., “gender-variant male”) and use the pronouns parents used at the time of the interviews.
3. I use “cisgender” to mean not transgender, or identifying with the gender presumed at birth.
5. “Tomboys,” of course, complicate this simple symmetry, as “masculine” girls are often given more latitude than “feminine” boys. However, parents of transgender boys in this sample advised that their children’s persistent desires to be addressed as “boys” (including requesting boys’ haircuts and male pronouns) made the “tomboy” category feel nonviable early into grade school, signaling the potential limits of this category for significant female masculinity.
6. The children represented here come from a variety of family contexts that would impact the availability of gender-atypical items (i.e., older/younger siblings, only children). However, these children often expressed their preferences through objects found at the store.
7. I do not give these observations to suggest objective distinctions between these children and their potentially more normative counterparts. Rather, I aim to highlight specific actions and interpretations these parents cited for coming to conceive of, and embrace, their child as categorically gender-variant or transgender.
8. The female spotted hyena has an enlarged clitoris that becomes erect, which scientists name a “pseudo-penis.”

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Kane, Emily. 2006. “No way my boys are going to be like that!” Gender & Society 20:149–76.

Chapter 4: Learning and Doing Gender • 201

Introduction to Reading 17

This reading by Michela Musto is about gender socialization, how males and females learn to be boys and girls, emphasizing the role of adult authority figures other than parents in this process. In this reading, Musto describes peer influence on gender socialization, but she also describes something we have been emphasizing throughout this book—the influence of context on the way we display gender. Over the course of one season, she observed children in the Shark swimming group, the fastest swimmers in their age bracket. She watched these children disregard gender during swim practice but continue to practice gender “borderwork” during free time, albeit in a modified form. Her research helps us understand how gender is not an essential or inborn characteristic of people but rather something that is reinforced in the structural and contextual settings in which we enact gender.

1. What makes the children in the Shark group less likely to do gender than children in the other swimming groups with the same coach?

2. Think about ways you can use this reading to argue that gender is not an inborn, biological trait of children.

3. Imagine other settings in which children are less likely to engage in gender “borderwork.” What characteristics of these settings are important in undoing gender?
ATHLETES IN THE POOL, GIRLS AND BOYS ON DECK

THE CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN COED YOUTH SWIMMING

Michela Musto

Although it is only eight o’clock in the morning, the swimming pool at the Sun Valley Aquatics Center is bustling with activity.¹ It is a warm, sunny day in southern California, and 300 kids are participating in a Sun Valley Swim Team (SVST) swim meet. Girls and boys as young as five years old rummage through their swim bags, grabbing goggles and swim caps as they walk toward the starting blocks. Between races, swimmers slather their arms with waterproof sunblock, laugh with their friends, and offer each other bites of half-eaten bagels. To my right, three 11-year-old boys, Alex, Kevin, and Andrew, are sitting in a semi-circle, scrutinizing a “heat sheet” that lists the names of other boys and girls they are racing against in their upcoming events.² Alex notices he is the only boy in his race, sparking the following conversation:

Alex: They’re all girls! That’s sad.
Kevin: That must suck.
Andrew: I know her [points to a name on the paper]. You’re the only male! Have fun! You have the second-fastest time—she’s first, you’re second.

Alex: What’s her time?
Andrew: [Sophia’s] really fast. She was in Sharks.

Andrew flips the page, and the boys continue looking at their other events.

Throughout their conversation, Alex, Kevin, and Andrew draw upon multiple and contradictory meanings of gender. Although they agree that it “sucks” to be the “only male” in an “all girls’ event, the boys then discuss Sophia’s athleticism in a relatively unremarkable manner. Instead of teasing Alex for being slower than a girl, Andrew nonchalantly informs Alex that Sophia is “really fast,” something neither Alex nor Kevin contests. How was it possible for gender to simultaneously be of minimal and significant interest to the swimmers?

Because gender is a social structure that is embedded within individual, interactional, and institutional relations, social change toward gender equality is uneven across the gender order (Connell 1987, 2009; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 2004). The salience of gender varies across contexts, allowing some contexts to support more equitable patterns of gender relations than others (Britton 2000; Connell 1987; Deutsch 2007; Schippers 2002; Thorne 1993). Within a context, both structural mechanisms and hegemonic beliefs play an important role in determining whether individuals draw on and affirm group boundaries between the genders—what Thorne (1993) calls “borderwork” (see also Messner 2000; Morgan and Martin 2006; Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

Although scholars have theorized that alternative patterns of gender relations may shape social relations when gender is less salient

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(Britton 2000; Connell 1987; Deutsch 2007; Ridgeway 2009; Schippers 2007), few empirical studies have followed a group of individuals across different contexts to understand how gender relations and meanings may change. As the dialogue among the boys on the swim team suggest, because individuals negotiate different systems of accountability as they move from one setting to the next, gender can take on multiple meanings as a result of contextually specific, group-based interactions.

In what follows, I analyze nine months of participant observation research and 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with 8- to 10-year-old swimmers at SVST...

THE VARIABLE SALIENCE OF GENDER ACROSS CONTEXTS

Existing scholarship has identified specific structural mechanisms, such as formal and informal policies and practices, within an array of institutions that help explain how gender becomes a salient organizing principle in interactions (Messner 2000; Thorne 1993). In schools, the formal age separation and large number of students encourage boys and girls to engage in borderwork (Thorne 1993). At the same time, teachers can implement rules and seating charts that allow children to interact in “relaxed and non-gender-marked ways” (Thorne 1993, 64; see also Moore 2001). Similarly, bureaucratic policies reduce the amount of discrimination women experience within office workplaces (Morgan and Martin 2006; Ridgeway and Correll 2000). Yet the organization of many out-of-office business settings—such as having different tees for men and women on golf courses—continues to hold women professionals accountable to normative conceptualizations of gender (Morgan and Martin 2006).

In addition to structural mechanisms, hegemonic cultural beliefs also impact the salience of gender within interactions (Ridgeway and Correll 2000, 2004; Ridgeway 2009, 2011). Although the “default expectation” (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 513) may be to treat individuals in accordance with hegemonic beliefs, these beliefs can be less salient within interactions depending on a context’s gender composition, gender-typing, and institutional frame (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway 2009, 2011). However, even when structural mechanisms allow for less oppressive gender relations within some contexts, individuals often “implicitly fall back on cultural beliefs about gender” in new and unscripted settings (Ridgeway 2009, 156), thus reinscribing hegemonic patterns of gender relations.

Although individuals are often framed by hegemonic patterns of gender relations within interactions, interactions can also be framed by less oppressive patterns of gender relations and meanings. (Deutsch 2007; Hollander 2013; Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2000, 2004; Schippers 2007). However, the processes that allow individuals to enact alternative patterns of gender relations remain undertheorized within existing scholarship (for exceptions, see Finley 2010; Hollander 2013; Schippers 2002; Wilkins 2008). As sociologists have argued, there is not always a direct relationship between the cultural order and the meanings individuals associate with cultural representations (Connell 1987; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 1979; Swidler 1986). Instead, hegemonic meanings are negotiated and contested within group-based interactions (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

When applied to gender theory, the meanings people associate with gender may vary, perhaps dramatically, across contexts depending on whether gender is a salient organizing principle within group-based relations. Furthermore, if a context allows for nonhegemonic patterns of gender relations, perhaps aspects of the more egalitarian patterns of social relations can transfer across contexts (Hollander 2013).

Competitive youth swimming is an ideal setting to examine how gender boundaries and meanings are constructed and negotiated within everyday life (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 2000). Within the United States, sport has
historically played a visible role in naturalizing hierarchical, categorical, and essentialist differences between the genders (Kimmel 1996; Lorber 1994; Messner 2011). Because the institutional “center” of sport often affirms hegemonic masculinity (Messner 2002), girls’ and boys’ interactions within athletic contexts often help strengthen hierarchical and categorical group boundaries between the genders, thus maintaining the power, prestige, and resources boys have over girls (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 2000; Thorne 1993). Yet at the same time, research finds that girls’ and women’s athleticism is becoming normalized (Ezzell 2009; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Messner 2011), potentially calling into question hegemonic gender meanings pertaining to athleticism (Kane 1995; Messner 2002). Since it may be easier for individuals to enact alternative patterns of gender relations within contexts that are considered feminine (Finley 2010), the enactment of alternative patterns of gender relations may be especially apparent within competitive youth swimming, a sport that has historically been considered acceptable for white, middle-class girls to participate in (Bier 2011; Cahn 1994).

In this article, I follow a group of 8- to 10-year-old swimmers across different contexts at swim practices, asking: Do the meanings swimmers associate with gender vary as a result of their contextually specific, group-based interactions? If so, what are the conditions that allow swimmers to associate alternative cultural meanings with gender? To answer these questions, I outline the “gender geography” of swimmers’ gender relations within two main contexts, arguing that when gender was less salient and children could “see” athletic similarity between the genders, children interacted in ways that undermined hegemonic beliefs about gender. Yet when the salience of gender was high and structural mechanisms encouraged kids to engage in borderwork, swimmers affirmed beliefs in essentialist and categorical—but nonhierarchical—differences between the genders. By paying attention to structural mechanisms and the variable salience of gender, we can thus see whether and how children associate different meanings with gender across contexts. Furthermore, because the swimmers enacted nonhierarchical gender relations in both contexts, this article contributes to gender theory by introducing the concept of “spillover,” theorizing that aspects of less oppressive gender relations may transfer across contexts.

* * *

THE “GENDER GEOGRAPHY” OF SUN VALLEY SWIM TEAM

On my first day of research with SVST, Coach Elizabeth started Sharks swim practice with a team meeting. The day before, she explained, she had to “excuse” the athletes from practice early for misbehaving—something she had not done to a group of swimmers in more than three years. While solemnly addressing the swimmers, Elizabeth reminded the athletes that they were the fastest swimmers in their age category; she thus expected more from them than if they were in the Dolphins or Piranhas groups. Elizabeth told the swimmers that while they were at swim practices, “There is a time to listen and a time for fun.” When it was “time to listen,” Elizabeth stressed that the swimmers should pay attention, remain focused, and follow her instructions. By doing so, they would achieve their goals of becoming faster swimmers.

As Elizabeth’s speech suggests, there were two main contexts that organized swimmers’ relations at the pool: focused athletic contexts in which swimmers were expected to follow their coach’s instructions, and unfocused free time in which swimmers had fun with their friends. . . . [T]he variable salience of gender at the pool played an important role in shaping the different meanings swimmers associated with gender within and across these contexts. As a result of the structural mechanisms instituted by Coach Elizabeth during focused aspects of practice, gender was less salient in this context, and the
swimmers interacted in nonantagonistic ways. While doing so, the swimmers regularly witnessed athletic parity between the genders and associated alternative, nonhegemonic meanings pertaining to athleticism. Because the gender meanings changed across contexts at the pool, however, gender was highly salient during the swimmers’ free time. Structural mechanisms instead encouraged the kids to engage in borderwork in this context. Because swimmers tended to interact in antagonistic ways in their free time, similarities between the genders were less visible, ultimately encouraging the swimmers to associate gender with categoricalism and essentialism.

Racing “for Times”: Focused Aspects of Practice

The most focused aspects of Sharks swim practices occurred when athletes raced “for times.” While racing “for times,” athletes swam a distance, such as 50 or 100 yards, as fast as they could—like they did during formal competitions. Afterwards, the athletes calculated how fast they swam the interval and reported their times to Coach Elizabeth. In interviews, athletes described racing “for times” as having “to sprint and go as fast as you can” while trying “to get the same time [as] in the [swim] meet.” Zoe, a nine-year-old Asian girl, told me that during these workouts, she compares herself to Olympians like Michael Phelps and Natalie Coughlin, reminding herself, “If you were one of them, you wouldn’t be able to stop, so just try to push through it and work hard and think of something else besides how hard it is.” As Zoe’s strategy suggests, racing “for times” was not a time to goof around. Instead, in this context, swimmers were expected to work hard, swim fast, and push themselves when tired.

During these workouts, Elizabeth often organized swimmers into groups according to their athletic ability. While assigning the swimmers to lanes, Elizabeth either instructed the fastest athletes to share a lane or assigned several fast swimmers to each lane. To motivate the athletes, Elizabeth often encouraged the swimmers to race the swimmers next to them, catch the swimmers in front of them, and compare times with other swimmers in their lanes. Because the girls and boys had relatively equal athletic abilities, racing for times was a context where swimmers of both genders regularly trained and raced together...

[During focused aspects of practice, Coach Elizabeth organized lanes based on athletes’ fastest times, not gender. While following Elizabeth’s instructions to race other swimmers, Nick and Jon compared themselves to Sophia—a girl. After hearing Lesley’s time on the first 200-yard Individual Medley, Elizabeth instructed Lesley to swim with faster swimmers—both were boys. Instances where the girls and boys compared times and raced each other occurred regularly in this context.]

As previous scholarship has argued, gender is often highly salient when kids engage in mixed-gender competitions—especially within athletic contexts (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 2000; Moore 2001; Thorne 1993). While racing “for times,” Sophia could have teased Nick and Jon for losing to “a girl,” or Jon could have told Lesley that “girls suck” at swimming. However, when coaches or athletes directly compared girls’ and boys’ performances during SVST practices, I never heard athletes use these comparisons as an opportunity to evoke antagonistic interactions. Instead, similar to how teachers can encourage boys and girls to interact in relaxed, nonantagonistic ways by dividing students by reading abilities instead of gender (Thorne 1993), the informal policies instituted by Coach Elizabeth minimized the salience of gender within this context. The swimmers were instructed to complete tasks with specific goals (Moore 2001; Ridgeway 2011), allowing the girls and boys to interact in ways that did not affirm group boundaries between the genders.

“It’s Just, Like, the Same Thing”: Alternative Meanings of Gender

Because gender was less salient during focused aspects of Sharks swim practices, the
swimmers interacted in ways that allowed them to associate alternative meanings with gender. This became clear when the athletes discussed instances they raced against swimmers of the other gender. Without nervously giggling or averting his eyes, Jon talked about getting “killed” by Sophia when they swam breaststroke. Cody leaned back and shrugged as he told me, “It doesn’t matter . . . It’s just, like, the same thing” if he loses to a girl or a boy. When asked who he races during practices, Nick spontaneously compared his times to Sophia’s:

When Brady (11, white) was in the group I always raced against him. Now that he’s gone the only one left is Sophia. Which, 200 IMs, no question, she’s gonna win because my breaststroke sucks. Butterfly . . . I’ll usually [win]—well, most of the time. Backstroke, it’s a 50-50 game, and freestyle, 50-50. Breaststroke, no doubt she’s in front.

Without a hint of defensiveness about losing to a girl, Nick made detailed comparisons between himself and Sophia. Even in butterfly, his fastest stroke, Nick recognized that he wins only “most of the time.” Although boys often have much at stake in maintaining hierarchical and categorical differences between the genders (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Thorne 1993), at SVST the boys instead associated alternative meanings with gender while talking about racing “for times,” where athleticism was not associated with hierarchy or difference.

The girls also talked about racing “for times” in ways that suggested they were not inferior or fundamentally different athletes because of their gender. Chelsea, a 10-year-old Asian girl, told me that boys are “not always faster [in swimming], sometimes they can be slower.” Similarly, Anna, a 10-year-old white girl, discussed a race she lost to Elijah, a 10-year-old white boy. Instead of justifying defeat by saying that boys are always faster than girls, Anna identified a specific reason why she lost. She explained that when she dove into the water, “I [dove] to the side. It was not a good dive.” Even Wendy, a nine-year-old white girl—one of the slowest athletes in the group—told me that because Sophia is as fast as Nick, there was “not really” a difference between the girls’ and boys’ swimming abilities.

There are two reasons Sharks swim practices were an ideal context for swimmers to enact nonhegemonic patterns of gender relations pertaining to athleticism. First, the Sharks swimmers were the fastest group of “ten and under” swimmers on the team, and highly committed to athletics. Many of the Sharks swimmers told me they attended practice to “get better times” or to “get better” at swimming. Several of the boys and girls expressed a desire to swim in the Olympics one day, and Grace, a 10-year-old white girl, even chose to attend swim practice instead of her best friend’s birthday party. Because of the athletes’ commitment, the majority of swimmers willingly followed Elizabeth’s instructions—even if it meant sharing lanes with swimmers of the other gender. Swimmers in the other “10 and under” groups on the team, however, did not always follow their coaches’ instructions as readily. I occasionally noticed girls and boys in the Dolphins and Piranhas groups make faces and shriek when instructed to share lanes with swimmers of the other gender—something Sharks swimmers never did while racing “for times.” As a result of the Sharks swimmers’ commitment to athleticism, acting in accordance with the structural mechanisms instituted by Elizabeth likely mattered more than it did to other “10 and under” athletes.

Additionally, while following Elizabeth’s instructions to share lanes and race one another, the swimmers compared times, a relatively transparent measure of ability. If the athletes were playing a team sport like basketball or soccer, where athleticism is assessed through less quantifiable skills, such as dribbling or blocking ability, it may have been easier for the boys to marginalize or masculinize the girls’ abilities (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Thorne 1993). Indeed, during interviews, several of the girls and boys discussed instances during recess and physical education classes when boys invoked hierarchical and categorical notions of gender while playing team sports,
such as when they refused to play with girls or became upset after losing to girls. During Sharks swim practices, however, the swimmers were frequently provided with specific, quantifiable instances of girls beating boys and boys beating girls. Through these time-based comparisons, it became clear that the girls’ and boys’ abilities overlapped (Kane 1995). As a result, within a context where swimmers willingly interacted in ways that illuminated similarities between the genders, girls and boys associated nonhegemonic meanings with gender.

Having Fun with Friends: Unsupervised Free Time

The least focused aspects of swimming occurred during the swimmers’ free time. Sharks swimmers were never completely unsupervised on the pool deck, but there were times—such as before swim practices or between races at swim meets—when SVST coaches were busy coaching other swimmers. As opposed to focused aspects of practice, which were “hard” and “tiring,” unsupervised free time was a chance for the kids to have fun with their friends. David, a 10-year-old Latino boy, explained that before and after swim practice, he and his friends had “lots of fun together.” Grace told me, “It’s always fun to come here and see [my friends],” and Chelsea similarly said that she had “fun” while “hanging out” with her friends before practices.

The unsupervised aspect of the swimmers’ free time played an important role in shaping kids’ social interactions with their friends. At the pool, I did not observe patterns of age and racial separation that other scholars have observed among children in schools and summer camps (Lewis 2003; Moore 2001; Perry 2002). In interviews, furthermore, most of the swimmers had a difficult time naming their closest friends on the team, explaining that they were close friends with “everyone” and had “a lot of good friends [on the team].” Despite the ostensive unity among the swimmers, none of the swimmers reported being friends with kids of the other gender. For example, Nick, a multiracial nine-year-old, named every male swimmer and male coach he could think of when describing his “good friends.”

Nick’s “good friends” range from boys in the Sharks group to one of the men who worked at the pool’s café. Like other swimmers in the Sharks group, moreover, Nick developed friendships across racial and age categories. Although the requirements for being Nick’s friend are not particularly stringent—you simply needed to “chat a lot” or give him a discount on food—the only girl he mentions is his sister, who can be “very annoying.” This is striking because Nick’s parents were good friends with the parents of Chelsea, a girl in the Sharks group. On several different occasions, Nick talked about going fishing with Chelsea’s family and having her family over for barbecues. Once, he even told me he dreamed about raiding her family’s food pantry. Based on Nick’s criteria, Chelsea should count as a friend. However, when I asked Nick if he ever “hangs out” with Chelsea, he simply responded, “No.” When asked to elaborate, he explained, “I don’t hang out with girls.”

As Nick’s comments suggest, gender was a highly salient category that structured kids’ friendships during their free time. Among swimmers in the Sharks group, this gender separation was marked with extensive physical separation. After changing into their swim suits in segregated locker rooms, the girls would set their swim bags near the right end of the bleachers that lined the length of the pool. The boys would walk past the girls, often without even glancing in their direction, to the far end of the benches, placing their bags almost 50 meters from the girls’ space.

There were three reasons why gender became a highly salient organizing principle within the kids’ group-based relations during unsupervised free time. First, as opposed to when Coach Elizabeth instructed the girls and boys to share lanes and compare times, in unsupervised aspects of practices, no policies encouraged the boys and girls to interact. Because the swimmers’
unsupervised free time was not formally scripted, the kids relied on gender as a highly salient criterion when developing friendships (Ridgeway 2011). Furthermore, similar to how formal gender segregation on soccer teams and golf courses can increase the salience of gender within interactions (Messner 2000; Morgan and Martin 2006), the policy of physically separating the swimmers into gender-segregated locker rooms before and after practice formally marked the boys and girls as different when they entered and exited the pool deck. And finally, the crowded nature of the pool deck may have contributed to the salience of gender in this context (Thorne 1993). Because there were often between 50 and 100 kids on the pool deck during SVST practices, there were plenty of witnesses who could tease kids for having “crushes” on kids of the other gender, making it risky for the girls and boys to socialize with each other. Thus, in the swimmers’ free time, rather than developing friendships based on similar interests or athletic ability, the lack of rules, the threat of heterosexual teasing, and gender-segregated locker rooms helped create a context where gender was highly salient.

“Boys Are Always Wild” and “Girls Are Very Nice and Sweet”: Hegemonic Meanings of Gender

Given the high salience of gender boundaries during swimmers’ unsupervised free time, the girls’ and boys’ interactions often strengthened gender-based group boundaries during unsupervised aspects of practice (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 2000; Thorne 1993). Once, before practice, Nick shouted his last name while jumping toward Katie. While mimicking his motion, Katie shouted, “Weirdo!” back at him. Several times, I watched Nick, Brady, and Sophia dump cold water on one another’s heads after practice. After a swimming fundraiser, Katie, Jon, and Cody spent 10 minutes hitting and splashing one another with foam swimming “noodles” in the pool. Toward the end of a swim meet, several boys filled their swim caps with water and tried splashing Lesley and Grace. After wrestling the swim caps out of the boys’ hands, Grace came over to me and told me that Elijah gave her “cooties.”

Although the swimmers tended to interact in antagonistic ways during their free time, borderwork at the pool did not seem to be based on beliefs in male supremacy. Unlike existing research has suggested (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Messner 2000; Thorne 1993), boys did not provoke antagonistic relations more frequently than girls, nor did the boys control more space on the pool deck. Furthermore, the girls never tried to avoid confrontations with the boys, and instead seemed confident in their ability to interact as equals. Once, for example, I was talking with Katie when Amy, an 11-year-old Asian girl, walked over to us. Elijah and Jon were standing several feet away, wearing swimming flippers on their hands. Katie warned Amy that the boys would “smack you with that fin” if Amy got too close. Amy, however, rolled her eyes and told Katie, “I’m not scared.” She then punched Katie’s arm a couple of times, demonstrating how she would fight if provoked. If the swimmers had believed that boys on the pool deck were stronger than the girls, Amy may have been more cautious about fighting Jon and Elijah. Instead, she confidently proclaimed that she was “not scared” and demonstrated how she would punch them.

Other girls in the Sharks group also seemed confident in their ability to engage in borderwork as equals with the boys. Once, much to the girls’ excitement, Katie “pantsed” Elijah at a swim meet. Another time, after Nick dumped what he described as “ice cold” water on Sophia’s head, she got “revenge” by pouring red Gatorade on him. If Katie or Sophia had believed the boys were stronger or more powerful than the girls, they may have been more cautious about fighting Jon and Elijah. Instead, she confidently proclaimed that she was “not scared” and demonstrated how she would punch them.
salient aspect of social interactions (Ridgeway 2011), the swimmers’ antagonistic interactions in this context did not appear to be based upon a sense of male supremacy. Instead, they were transformative in the sense that they allowed the girls to occupy space and express agency when interacting as equals with the boys. However, because these interactions continued to affirm categorical and essentialist differences between the genders, they simultaneously undermined and reproduced aspects of hegemonic gender relations.

Furthermore, all the swimmers talked about sharing close physical space with kids of the other gender in ways that were markedly different from how they talked about racing one another. When talking about racing “for times,” the swimmers willingly recognized and discussed the overlap between girls’ and boys’ abilities. However, on a social level, the meanings kids associated with gender were firmly grounded in categorical differences. Perhaps because of the risk of heterosexual teasing (Thorne 1993), boys and girls told me that spending time with athletes of the other gender was “not fun,” “awkward,” “annoying,” “awful,” “super uncomfortable,” “gross,” “kinda weird,” and “really bad and really messed up.” Furthermore, many of the kids articulated essentialist understandings of gender within these narratives, explaining that “boys are always wild,” “girls are very nice and sweet,” “girls are more limber,” and “boys are more competitive.” Notably, however, the swimmers did not include assumptions about male supremacy within these explanations. Instead, as suggested by their patterns of borderwork, the swimmers associated categorical and essentialist—but nonhierarchical—meanings with gender.

As an observer who spent an equal amount of time with the girls and boys, it was puzzling to hear girls and boys make categorical and essentialist distinctions between the genders. If girls were always “more limber” than boys, then how could the swimmers account for the boy from the Sharks group who frequently did the splits before swim practice? If “girls are very nice and sweet,” then how could they explain the times when the girls screamed at and hit one another? Although it was easy for me to think of exceptions to the kids’ generalizations, whenever I asked kids about these exceptions, my questions were met with shrugs and surprise.

Despite being quite knowledgeable about one another’s swimming abilities, the girls and boys were relatively unaware of the other group’s social experiences. Because the swimmers tended to provoke antagonistic interactions with one another, similarities between the genders were obscured. Unlike focused aspects of practice, structural mechanisms did not illuminate the similarities between the girls and boys (Kane 1995). In this less scripted context, the kids instead drew upon and enacted aspects of hegemonic patterns of gender relations (Morgan and Martin 2006; Ridgeway 2009, 2011). The swimmers, however, did not default to enacting all aspects of hegemonic gender relations. The swimmers’ group-based interactions led the swimmers to associate gender with categorical and essentialist meanings, but the assumption that boys are superior to girls was notably absent from swimmers’ interactions during unsupervised free time.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Gender is a social structure embedded within individual, interactional, and institutional relations (Connell 2009; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Messner 2000; Risman 2004). At the institutional level, femininities and masculinities are ranked in societal-wide, historically based hierarchies that are created and re-created through laws, policies, practices, collective representations, symbols, and hegemonic meanings of gender (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994), but the impact of structural mechanisms and hegemonic cultural beliefs within interactions varies based on the context (Britton 2000; Connell 1987; Deutsch 2007; Messner 2000; Morgan and Martin 2006; Ridgeway 2009, 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Thome 1993).
My research contributes to existing literature by exploring how gender meanings and relations change across contexts. By following the same group of individuals across different contexts, I found that the meanings kids associated with a social category such as “gender” did not always align with hegemonic beliefs. Instead, the swimmers’ understandings of gender were filtered through group-based interactions and thus varied dramatically depending on the context (Fine 1979; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Swidler 1986).

NOTES

1. The swim team name and names of all participants are pseudonyms.
2. SVST coaches occasionally organized intra-squad swim meets, where boys and girls of all ages race against one another in heats arranged from slowest to fastest.
3. Because the kids often wore pants and T-shirts over their swimsuits during their free time, summers occasionally tried to pull down other swimmers’ pants, revealing their swimsuits in the process.

REFERENCES


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**Introduction to Reading 18**

In this piece, Janice McCabe, Emily Fairchild, Liz Grauerholz, Bernice A. Pescosolido, and Daniel Tope conducted a quantitative analysis of Little Golden Books (1942–1993), Caldecott award winners (1938–2000), and *Children’s Catalog* (1900–2000). This sample covers a wide range of children’s books through the 20th century. Little Golden Books are relatively inexpensive and available widely, including in grocery stores; the Caldecott award is given annually by the Association for Library Service to Children for “the most distinguished picture book for children” (books receiving honorable mention were also included in the sample); and *Children’s Catalog* is an extensive listing of all books for children. The authors coded gender information from titles and main characters—including animals if they were the subject of the story—for 5,618 books. Their findings of the distribution of female and male characters in children’s books throughout the 20th century might surprise you.

1. Were males or females more likely to be included in the titles of books and as main characters?

2. In which type of book were the differences in gender representation more extreme?

3. Why does it matter that both sexes are not equally represented in the books studied?
Research on gender representation in children’s literature has revealed persistent patterns of gender inequality, despite some signs of improvement since Weitzman et al.’s (1972) classic study more than 35 years ago. Recent studies continue to show a relative absence of women and girls in titles and as central characters (e.g., Clark, Lennon, and Morris 1993; Hamilton et al. 2006), findings that mirror those from other sources of children’s media, including cartoons and coloring books (e.g., Fitzpatrick and McPherson 2010; Klein and Shiffman 2009). Theoretically, this absence reflects a “symbolic annihilation” because it denies existence to women and girls by ignoring or underrepresenting them in cultural products (Tuchman 1978). As such, children’s books reinforce, legitimate, and reproduce a patriarchal gender system.

Because children’s literature provides valuable insights into popular culture, children’s worlds, stratification, and socialization, gender representation in children’s literature has been researched extensively. Yet most studies provide snapshots of a small set of books during a particular time period while making sweeping claims about change (or lack thereof) and generalizing to all other books. . . . While examining particular books during limited time periods may reveal important insights about these periods and books, we know little about representation of males and females in the broad range of books available to children throughout the twentieth century. . . .

Children’s Understandings of Gender: Schemas, Reader Response, and Symbolic Annihilation

No medium has been more extensively studied than children’s literature. This is no doubt due, in part, to the cultural importance of children’s books as a powerful means through which children learn their cultural heritage (Bettelheim 1977). Children’s books provide messages about right and wrong, the beautiful and the hideous, what is attainable and what is out of bounds—in sum, a society’s ideals and directions. Simply put, children’s books are a celebration, reaffirmation, and dominant blueprint of shared cultural values, meanings, and expectations.

Childhood is central to the development of gender identity and schemas. By preschool, children have learned to categorize themselves and others into one of two gender identity categories, and parents, teachers, and peers behave toward children based on these categories. The development of a gender identity and understandings of the expectations associated with it continue throughout childhood. Along with parents, teachers, and peers, books contribute to how children understand what is expected of women and men and shape how they think of their place in the social structure: Through stories, “children learn to constitute themselves [sic] as bipolar males or females with the appropriate patterns of power and desire” (Davies 2003, 49). Books are one piece of
a socialization and identity formation process that is colored by children’s prior understandings of gender, or gender schemas. Because schemas are broad cognitive structures that organize and guide perception, they are often reinforced and difficult to change. It takes consistent effort to combat dominant cultural messages (Bem 1983), including those sent by the majority of books.

The extensive body of research (often referred to as “reader response”) examining the role of the reader in constructing meanings of literature (e.g., Applebee 1978; Cullingford 1998) comes to a similar conclusion. We interpret stories through the filter of our prior knowledge about other stories and everyday experiences; in other words, schemas shape our interpretations. Reading egalitarian books to children over a sustained period of time changes children’s gender attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Barclay 1974; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski 1999). However, one book is unlikely to drastically change a child’s gender schema.

The effects of gender schemas can be seen in children’s preferences for male characters. Boys and, to a lesser extent, girls prefer stories about boys and men (e.g., Bleakley, Westerberg, and Hopkins 1988; Connor and Serbin 1978). This research suggests that children see girls and women as less important and interesting. Even seeming exceptions to the pattern of male preference support the underlying premise: When boys identify with a girl as a central character, they redefine her as a secondary character (Segel 1986) and they identify male secondary characters as central characters when retelling stories (Davies 2003). Patterns of gender representation in children’s books, therefore, work with children’s existing schemas and beliefs about their own gender identity. A consistently unequal pattern of males and females in children’s books thus contributes to and reinforces children’s gender schemas and identities.

While representation in the media conveys social existence, exclusion (or underrepresentation) signifies nonexistence or “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman 1978). Not showing a particular group or showing them less frequently than their proportion in the population conveys that the group is not socially valued. This phenomenon has been documented in a range of outlets—from television (Tuchman 1978) to introductory sociology textbooks (Ferree and Hall 1990) to animated cartoons (Klein and Shiffman 2009). Yet, research on “symbolic annihilation” has neglected children’s books and failed to tie representations to broader historical changes.

**HISTORICAL CHANGE: GENDER THROUGHOUT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Inequitable gender representations may have diminished over time in the United States, corresponding with women gaining rights throughout the century (e.g., voting and reproductive rights) and entrance into the public sphere via the workplace, politics, and media. However, it seems more likely that there will be periods of greater disparity and periods of greater parity, corresponding with upsurges in feminist activism and backlash against progressive gender reforms. For instance, Cancian and Ross (1981) identified a curvilinear pattern in newspapers’ and magazines’ coverage of women, finding that coverage peaked during the first wave of feminist activism (1908–1920) and dipped until the second wave was well underway in 1970, when it began to rise again.

Thus, we have reason to believe that representations during midcentury—after the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote but before the second-wave women’s movement—may differ from other parts of the century. Historians have identified the 1930s as a time of backlash against the changes in gender expectations and sexual freedom of the 1920s (Cott 1987; Scharf 1980). While resistance to these changes existed in the first two decades of the century (Kimmel 1987), the tide shifted with the Great Depression. Women were scorned for taking “male jobs” (Evans 1997; Scharf 1980), the increase in the number of women in the
professions “came to a halt” (Scharf 1980, 85), and the media asked “Is Feminism Dead?” in 1935 (Scharf 1980, 110). Even when women’s employment skyrocketed during WWII, traditional notions of gender persisted through the valuation of the “domestic ideology” (Evans 1997; Friedan 1963; Rupp and Taylor 1987) and women were “criticized for failing to raise their sons properly” (Evans 1997, 234). This gender traditionalism and antifeminism persisted into the 1960s, although feminist challenges to gender expectations began to swell again with President Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women, the Equal Pay Act, the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, and the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) (Rupp and Taylor 1987). The cumulative effects of these events were apparent in the 1970s as feminism rapidly expanded in a second wave of activism (Cancian and Ross 1981; Evans 1997). Although there was some resistance to feminism during the 1980s (Evans 1997; Faludi 1991), this latter part of the century saw a more consistent presence of activism; by no measure are females present more frequently than males. In fact, the mode for males in titles is 33, meaning that the most common distribution is that one-third of the books published that year include a male in the title, whereas the mode for females is 0, meaning that the most common distribution is that no book titles include females. More striking, no more than 33 percent of books published in a year contain central characters who are adult women or female animals, whereas adult men and male animals appear in up to 100 percent.

Second, [there are] important variations by type of character. The greatest parity exists for child central characters; the greatest disparity exists for animal characters. Boys appear as central characters in 26.4 percent of books and girls in 19 percent, but male animals are central...
characters in 23.2 percent of books while female animals are in only 7.5 percent. The data show one instance of a higher range of books including female characters than male: that for children, where up to 75 percent of books in a year contain girl central characters while a maximum of 50 percent contain boys. It should be noted, however, that only one year has 75 percent girls and that most years have higher ranges for boys than for girls.

Third, there are differences across book series, but—as with variations by type of character—these differences are by degree, not direction. Regardless of book series, males are always represented more often than females in titles and as central characters; however, the extent of the disparities differs. Golden Books tend to have the most unbalanced representations; Goldens have the highest mean and mode of males in the titles of any of the book types and the highest mean value of male central characters, followed by Caldecotts and the Catalog. The greatest disparity—animal characters—and the smallest—child characters—are also consistent across book types.

...All of the male to female comparisons...are statistically significant; in other words, for each variable in each book series, males are present in significantly more books than are females. When all books are combined, we find 1,857 (out of 5,618) books where males appear in the titles, compared to 966 books with females; a ratio of 1.9:1. For central characters, 3,418 books featured any male and 2,098 featured any female (1.6:1). Once again, the greatest disparity is for animal characters (2.6:1) and the least for child characters (1.3:1)...

A closer look at the types of characters with the greatest disparity reveals that only one Caldecott winner has a female animal as a central character without any male central characters. The 1985 Honor book Have You Seen My Duckling?...follows Mother Duck asking other pond animals this question as she searches for a missing duckling. One other Caldecott has a female animal without a male animal also in a central role; however, in Officer Buckle and Gloria, the female dog is present alongside a male police officer. Although female animal characters do exist, books with male animals, such as Barkley...and The Poky Little Puppy...were more than two-and-a-half times more common across the century than those with female animals.

The greatest disparity in titles and overall characters occurs among the Little Golden Books and Caldecott award winners and the least disparity in the Catalog books...Regardless of type of character (i.e., child or adult, human or animal), books in the Catalog are significantly more equal than the Goldens...

Trends by Historical Period

Data presented thus far provide a general picture of disparity in children’s books. However, we expect historical and social factors to affect representation. ...Books published during the 1930s-1960s are more likely than earlier or later decades to feature males in the titles and, with one exception (1900s), as central characters. Books in early and later years are more likely to feature females, such as Harriet and Mirette while midcentury books, like The Poky Little Puppy feature more males. In rare cases, there are actually more females than males in both the early and later parts of the twentieth century. ...The most equitable category is child central characters. In contrast, animal characters are the least equitable. Although the most recently published books come quite close to parity for human characters (ratios of 0.9:1 [children] to 1.2:1 [adults] for the 1990s), a significant disparity remains for animals (1.9:1). All of [our analyses] show a nonlinear pattern, with greatest inequality midcentury.

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DISCUSSION

Gender is a social creation; cultural representation, including that in children’s literature, is a key source in reproducing and legitimating
gender systems and gender inequality. The messages conveyed through representation of males and females in books contribute to children’s ideas of what it means to be a boy, girl, man, or woman. The disparities we find point to the symbolic annihilation of women and girls, and particularly female animals, in twentieth-century children’s literature, suggesting to children that these characters are less important than their male counterparts.

We provide a comprehensive picture of children’s books and demonstrate disparities on multiple measures. Still, there may be reason to believe that our findings are conservative regarding the unequal representation children actually experience. This is due in part to how gender schemas and developing gender ideologies are compounded. Reader response research suggests that as children read books with male characters, their preferences for male characters are reinforced, and they will continue reaching for books that feature boys, men, and male animals. Children’s exposure, moreover, is likely narrower than the range of books we studied.

Adults also play important roles as they select books for their own children and make purchasing decisions for schools and libraries. Because boys prefer male central characters while girls’ preferences are less strong, textbooks in the 1980s advised: “the ratio of ‘boy books’ should be about two to one in the classroom library collection” (Segel 1986, 180). Given this advice, disparities in actual libraries and classrooms could be even larger than what we found.

Although feminist stories have circulated since at least the 1970s, neither feminist versions of old stories nor new feminist stories are readily available in bookshops and libraries, and schools show almost no sign of this development” (Davies 2003, 49). Therefore, combating the patterns we found with “feminist stories” requires parents’ conscious efforts. While some parents do this, most do not. A study of parents’ reasons for selecting books finds most choices are based on parents’ personal childhood favorites—indicating the continued impact of books from generations ago—and rarely on concern for stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes (Peterson and Lach 1990).

Our historical lens allowed us to see change over time, but not consistent improvement. Rather, our findings support what other studies of media have shown: that coverage of social groups corresponds to changes in access to political influence (Burstein 1979; Cancian and Ross 1981). We found that the period of greatest disparity between males and females in children’s books was the 1930s–1960s—precisely the period following the first-wave women’s movement. Historians have noted, “No question, feminism came under heavy scrutiny—and fire—by the end of the 1920s” (Cott 1987, 271), coinciding with the beginning of this midcentury period. And, “‘women’s lib’ was on everyone’s lips” by 1970 (Evans 1997, 287), coinciding with the end of this period. Certainly, shifts in gender politics affect representation. . .

Why is there a persistence of inequality among animal characters? There is some indication that publishers, under pressure to publish books that are more balanced regarding gender, used animal characters in an attempt to avoid the problem of gender representation. . . . As one book editor in Turow’s (1978) study of children’s book publishing remarked about the predominant use of animal central characters: “It’s easier. You don’t have to determine if it’s a girl or boy—right? That’s such a problem today. And if it’s a girl, God forbid you put her in a pink dress” (p. 89). However, our findings show that most animal characters are sexed and that inequality among animals is greater—not less—than that among humans. The tendency of readers to interpret even gender-neutral animal characters as male exaggerates the pattern of female underrepresentation. For example, mothers (even those scoring high on the Sex Role Egalitarianism Questionnaire) frequently label gender-neutral animal characters as male when reading or discussing books with their children (DeLoache, Cassidy, and Carpenter 1987) and children assign gender to gender-neutral animal characters (Arthur and White 1996). Together with research on reader interpretations, our findings regarding imbalanced
representations among animal characters suggest that these characters could be particularly powerful, and potentially overlooked, conduits for gendered messages. The persistent pattern of disparity among animal characters may reveal a subtle kind of symbolic annihilation of women disguised through animal imagery—a strategy noted by others (Adams 2004; Grauerholz 2007; Irvine 2007).

Although children’s books have provided a steady stream of characters privileging boys and men over girls and women, examining representation across the long range illuminates areas where such messages are being challenged. Clearly, children’s book publishing has been responsive to social change, and girls are more likely to see characters and books about individuals like themselves today than midcentury. Feminist activism during the 1970s specifically targeted children’s books. For example, the publication of Weitzman et al.’s (1972) study appears to have influenced the publishing industry in important ways. Weitzman received funding from the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund to reproduce children’s book illustrations for a slide show to parents, educators, and publishers. This presentation made its way around the world in an effort to promote social change (Tobias 1997). Some argue that Weitzman et al.’s study profoundly shaped the children’s book industry as a “rallying point for feminist activism,” including the creation of “nonsexist” book lists and feminist publishing companies and the “raising of consciousness among more conventional publishers, award committees, authors, parents, and teachers” (Clark, Kulkkin, and Clancy 1999, 71). The linear change we found since 1970 for most measures suggests this second-wave push for gender equity in children’s books may have had a lasting impact.

Nonetheless, disparities remain in recent years, and our findings suggest ways that children’s books are less amenable to change, especially in the case of animals. Although we do not know the complete impact of unequal representation on children, these data, in conjunction with previous research on the development and maintenance of gender schemas and gender identities, reinforce the importance of continued attention to symbolic annihilation in children’s books. While children do not always interpret messages in books in ways adults intend (see, e.g., Davies 2003), the messages from the disparities we find are reinforced by similar—or even more unequal—ones among characters in G-rated films (Smith et al. 2010), cartoons (Klein and Shiffman 2009), video games (Downs and Smith 2010), and even coloring books (Fitzpatrick and McPherson 2010). This widespread pattern of underrepresentation of females may contribute to a sense of unimportance among girls and privilege among boys. Gender is a structure deeply embedded in our society, including in children’s literature. This research highlights patterns that give us hope for the success of feminist attention to issues of disparity and remind us that continued disparities have important effects on our understandings of gender and ourselves.

REFERENCES


Introduction to Reading 19

Many people erroneously believe that the reason women do not pursue careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields is because of innate differences between females and males. This article takes a different direction in trying to understand why these fields are so sex segregated. Maria Charles pursues cultural, economic, social, and institutional explanations for sex segregation in these areas. She compares gender across culture to give a deeper explanation for why there are fewer women than men in STEM careers in the United States.

1. Are interests in STEM subjects in school innate? Why or why not?
2. As you read this article, consider three arguments you could make for why more women do not pursue STEM careers in the United States.
3. What does Charles mean when she says “believing in difference can actually produce difference”? How does this fit with a socialization explanation?

What Gender Is Science?

Maria Charles

Gender equality crops up in surprising places. This is nowhere more evident than in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. The United States should be a world leader in the integration of prestigious male-dominated occupations and fields of study. After all, laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex have been in place for more than half a century, and the idea that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities is practically uncontested (at least in public) in the U.S. today.

This egalitarian legal and cultural context has coincided with a longstanding shortage of STEM
workers that has spurred countless initiatives by government agencies, activists, and industry to attract women into these fields. But far from leading the world, American universities and firms lag considerably behind those in many other countries with respect to women among STEM students and workers. Moreover, the countries where women are best represented in these fields aren’t those typically viewed as modern or “gender-progressive.” Far from it.

Sex segregation describes the uneven distributions of women and men across occupations, industries, or fields of study. While other types of gender inequality have declined dramatically since the 1960s (for example, in legal rights, labor force participation rates, and educational attainment), some forms of sex segregation are remarkably resilient in the industrial world.

In labor markets, one well-known cause of sex segregation is discrimination, which can occur openly and directly or through more subtle, systemic processes. Not so long ago, American employers’ job advertisements and recruitment efforts were targeted explicitly toward either men or women depending on the job. Although these gender-specific ads were prohibited under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, less blatant forms of discrimination persist. Even if employers base hiring and promotion solely on performance-based criteria, their taken-for-granted beliefs about average gender differences may bias their judgments of qualification and performance. (See Chapter 7 for a fuller discussion of sex segregation and discrimination in the labor force.)

Discrimination isn’t the whole story. It’s well-established that girls and young women often avoid mathematically intensive fields in favor of pursuits regarded as more human-centered. Analyses of gender-differentiated choices are controversial among scholars because this line of inquiry seems to divert attention away from structural and cultural causes of inequalities in pay and status. Acknowledging gender-differentiated educational and career preferences, though, doesn’t “blame the victim” unless preferences and choices are considered in isolation from the social contexts in which they emerge. A sociological analysis of sex segregation considers how the economic, social, and cultural environments influence preferences, choices, and outcomes. Among other things, we may ask what types of social context are associated with larger or smaller gender differences in aspirations. Viewed through this lens, preferences become much more than just individuals’ intrinsic qualities.

An excellent way to assess contextual effects is by investigating how career aspirations and patterns of sex segregation vary across countries. Recent studies show international differences in the gender composition of STEM fields, in beliefs about the masculinity of STEM, and in girls’ and women’s reported affinity for STEM-related activities. These differences follow unexpected patterns.

STEM AROUND THE WORLD

Many might assume women in more economically and culturally modern societies enjoy greater equality on all measures, since countries generally “evolve” in an egalitarian direction as they modernize. This isn’t the case for scientific and technical fields, though.

Statistics on male and female college graduates and their fields of study are available from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for 84 countries covering the period between 2005 and 2008. Sixty-five of those countries have educational systems large enough to offer a full range of majors and programs (at least 10,000 graduates per year).

One way of ranking countries on the sex segregation of science education is to compare the (female-to-male) gender ratio among science graduates to the gender ratio among graduates in all other fields. By this measure, the rich and highly industrialized U.S. falls in about the middle of the distribution (in close proximity to Ecuador, Mongolia, Germany, and Ireland—a heterogeneous group on most conventional measures of “women’s status”).
representation in science programs is weakest in the Netherlands and strongest in Iran, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, where science is disproportionately female. Although the Netherlands has long been considered a gender-traditional society in the European context, most people would still be intrigued to learn that women’s representation among science graduates is nearly 50 percentage points lower there than in many Muslim countries. . . . The most gender-integrated science programs are found in Malaysia, where women’s 57-percent share of science degree recipients precisely matches their share of all college and university graduates.

“Science” is a big, heterogeneous category, and life science, physical science, mathematics, and computing are fields with very different gender compositions. For example, women made up 60 percent of American biology graduates, but only about 19 percent of computing graduates, in 2008, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

But even when fields are defined more precisely, countries differ in some unexpected ways. A case in point is computer science in Malaysia and the U.S. While American computer scientists are depicted as male hackers and geeks, computer science in Malaysia is deemed well-suited for women because it’s seen as theoretical (not physical) and it takes place almost exclusively in offices (thought to be woman-friendly spaces). In interviews with sociologist Vivian Lagesen, female computer science students in Malaysia reported taking up computing because they like computers and because they and their parents think the field has good job prospects. The students also referenced government efforts to promote economic development by training workers, both male and female, for the expanding information technology field. About half of Malaysian computer science degrees go to women.

Engineering is the most strongly and consistently male-typed field of study worldwide, but its gender composition still varies widely across countries. Female representation is generally weaker in advanced industrial societies than in developing ones. In our 2009 article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Karen Bradley and I found this pattern using international data from the mid-1990s; it was confirmed by more recent statistics assembled by UNESCO. Between 2005 and 2008, countries with the most male-dominated engineering programs include the world’s leading industrial democracies (Japan, Switzerland, Germany, and the U.S.) along with some of the same oil-rich Middle Eastern countries in which women are so well-represented among science graduates (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates). Although women do not reach the 50-percent mark in any country, they come very close in Indonesia, where 48 percent of engineering graduates are female (compared to a 49-percent share of all Indonesian college and university graduates). Women comprise about a third of recent engineering graduates in a diverse group of countries including Mongolia, Greece, Serbia, Panama, Denmark, Bulgaria, and Malaysia.

While engineering is uniformly male-typed in the West, Lagesen’s interviews suggest Malaysians draw gender distinctions among engineering *subfields*. One female student reported, “. . . In chemical engineering, most of the time you work in labs. . . . So I think it’s quite suitable for females also. But for civil engineering . . . we have to go to the site and check out the constructions.”

**Girl Geeks in America**

Women’s relatively weak presence in STEM fields in the U.S. is partly attributable to some economic, institutional, and cultural features that are common to affluent Western democracies. One such feature is a great diversity of educational and occupational pathways. As school systems grew and democratized in the industrial West, educators, policymakers, and nongovernmental activists sought to accommodate women’s purportedly “human-centered” nature by developing educational programs that were seen to align functionally and culturally with female
domestic and social roles. Among other things, this involved expansion of liberal arts programs and development of vocationally oriented programs in home economics, nursing, and early-childhood education. Subsequent efforts to incorporate women, as women, into higher education have contributed to expansion in humanities programs, and, more recently, the creation of new fields like women’s studies and human development. These initiatives have been supported by a rapid expansion of service-sector jobs in these societies.

In countries with developing and transitional economies, though, policies have been driven more by concerns about advancing economic development than by interests in accommodating women’s presumed affinities. Acute shortages of educated workers prompted early efforts by governments and development agencies to increase the supply of STEM workers. These efforts often commenced during these fields’ initial growth periods—arguably before they had acquired strong masculine images in the local context.

Another reason for stronger sex segregation of STEM in affluent countries may be that more people (girls and women in particular) can afford to indulge tastes for less lucrative care and social service work in these contexts. Because personal economic security and national development are such central concerns to young people and their parents in developing societies, there is less latitude and support for the realization of gender-specific preferences.

Again, the argument that women’s preferences and choices are partly responsible for sex segregation doesn’t require that preferences are innate. Career aspirations are influenced by beliefs about ourselves (What am I good at and what will I enjoy doing?), beliefs about others (What will they think of me and how will they respond to my choices?), and beliefs about the purpose of educational and occupational activities (How do I decide what field to pursue?). And these beliefs are part of our cultural heritage. Sex segregation is an especially resilient form of inequality because people so ardently believe in, enact, and celebrate cultural stereotypes about gender difference.

Believing Stereotypes

Relationship counselor John Gray has produced a wildly successful series of self-help products in which he depicts men and women as so fundamentally different that they might as well come from different planets. While the vast majority of Americans today believe women should have equal social and legal rights, they also believe men and women are very different, and they believe innate differences cause them to freely choose distinctly masculine or feminine life paths. For instance, women and men are expected to choose careers that allow them to utilize their hard-wired interests in working with people and things, respectively.

Believing in difference can actually produce difference. Recent sociological research provides strong evidence that cultural stereotypes about gender difference shape individuals’ beliefs about their own competencies (“self-assessments”) and influence behavior in stereotype-consistent directions. Ubiquitous cultural depictions of STEM as intrinsically male reduce girls’ interest in technical fields by defining related tasks as beyond most women’s competency and as generally unenjoyable for them. STEM avoidance is a likely outcome.

Shelley Correll’s social psychological experiment demonstrates the self-fulfilling effects of gender beliefs on self-assessments and career preferences. Correll administered questions purported to test “contrast sensitivity” to undergraduates. Although the test had no objectively right or wrong answers, all participants were given identical personal “scores” of approximately 60 percent correct. Before the test, subjects were exposed to one of two beliefs: that men on average do better, or that men and women perform equally well. In the first group, male students rated their performance more highly than did female students, and male students were more likely to report aspiring to work in a job that requires contrast sensitivity. No gender differences were observed among subjects in the second group. Correll’s findings suggest that beliefs about difference can produce
gender gaps in mathematical self-confidence even in the absence of actual differences in ability or performance. If these beliefs lead girls to avoid math courses, a stereotype-confirming performance deficit may emerge. . .

Enacting Stereotypes

Whatever one believes about innate gender difference, it’s difficult to deny that men and women often behave differently and make different choices. Partly, this reflects inculcation of gender-typed preferences and abilities during early childhood. This “gender socialization” occurs through direct observation of same-sex role models, through repeated positive or negative sanctioning of gender-conforming or non-conforming behavior, and through assimilation of diffuse cultural messages about what males and females like and are good at. During much of the 20th century, math was one thing that girls have purportedly not liked or been good at. Even Barbie said so. Feminists and educators have long voiced concerns about the potentially damaging effects of such messages on the minds of impressionable young girls.

But even girls who don’t believe STEM activities are inherently masculine realize others do. It’s likely to influence their everyday interactions and may affect their life choices. For example, some may seek to affirm their femininity by avoiding math and science classes or by avowing a dislike for related activities. Sociologists who study the operation of gender in social interactions have argued that people expect to be judged according to prevailing standards of masculinity or femininity. This expectation often leads them to engage in behavior that reproduces the gender order. This “doing gender” framework goes beyond socialization because it doesn’t require that gender-conforming dispositions are internalized at an early age, just that people know others will likely hold them accountable to conventional beliefs about hard-wired gender differences.

The male-labeling of math and science in the industrial West means that girls and women may expect to incur social sanctions for pursuing these fields. Effects can be cumulative: taking fewer math classes will negatively affect achievement in math and attitudes toward math, creating a powerful positive feedback system.

Celebrating Stereotypes

Aspirations are also influenced by general societal beliefs about the nature and purpose of educational and occupational pursuits. Modern education does more than bestow knowledge; it’s seen as a vehicle for individual self-expression and self-realization. Parents and educators exhort young people, perhaps girls in particular, to “follow their passions” and realize their “true selves.” Because gender is such a central axis of individual identity, American girls who aim to “study what they love” are unlikely to consider male-labeled science, engineering, or technical fields, despite the material security provided by such degrees.

Although the so-called “postmaterialist” values of individualism and self-expression are spreading globally, they are most prominent in affluent late-modern societies. Curricular and career choices become more than practical economic decisions in these contexts; they also represent acts of identity construction and self-affirmation. Modern systems of higher education make the incursion of gender stereotypes even easier, by allowing wide latitude in course choices.

The ideological discordance between female gender identities and STEM pursuits may even generate attitudinal aversion among girls. Preferences can evolve to align with the gender composition of fields, rather than vice versa. Consistent with these arguments is new evidence showing that career-related aspirations are more gender-differentiated in advanced industrial than in developing and transitional societies. . . .

[T]he gender gap in eighth-graders’ affinity for math, confidence in math abilities, and interest in a math-related career is significantly smaller in less affluent countries than in rich (“postmaterialist”) ones. Clearly, there is more going on than intrinsic male and female preferences.
QUESTIONING STEM’S MASCULINITY

Playing on stereotypes of science as the domain of socially awkward male geniuses, CBS’s hit comedy “The Big Bang Theory” stars four nerdy male physicists and one sexy but academically challenged waitress. (Female physicists, when they do show up, are mostly caricatured as gender deviants: sexually unattractive and lacking basic competence in human interaction.) This depiction resonates with popular Western understandings of scientific and technical pursuits as intrinsically masculine.

But representations of scientific and technical fields as by nature masculine aren’t well-supported by international data. They’re also difficult to reconcile with historical evidence pointing to long-term historical shifts in the gender-labeling of some STEM fields. In *The Science Education of American Girls*, Kim Tolley reports that it was girls who were overrepresented among students of physics, astronomy, chemistry, and natural science in 19th-century American schools. Middle-class boys dominated the higher-status classical humanities programs thought to require top rational powers and required for university admission. Science education was regarded as excellent preparation for motherhood, social work, and teaching. Sociologist Katharine Donato tells a similar story about the dawn of American computer programming. Considered functionally analogous to clerical work, it was performed mostly by college-educated women with science or math backgrounds. This changed starting in the 1950s, when the occupation became attractive to men as a growing, intellectually demanding, and potentially lucrative field. The sex segregation of American STEM fields—especially engineering, computer science, and the physical sciences—has shown remarkable stability since about 1980.

The gender (and racial) composition of fields is strongly influenced by the economic and social circumstances that prevail at the time of their initial emergence or expansion. But subsequent transformative events, such as acute labor shortages, changing work conditions, and educational restructuring can effect significant shifts in fields’ demographic profiles. Tolley, for example, links men’s growing dominance of science education in the late 19th and early 20th century to changing university admissions requirements, the rapid growth and professionalization of science and technology occupations, and recurrent ideological backlashes against female employment.

A field’s designation as either “male” or “female” is often naturalized through cultural accounts that reference selected gender-conforming aspects of the work. Just as sex segregation across engineering subfields is attributed to physical location in Malaysia (inside work for women, outside work for men), American women’s overrepresentation among typists and sewers has been attributed to these occupations’ “feminine” task profiles, specifically their requirements for manual dexterity and attention to detail. While the same skills might be construed as essential to the work of surgeons and electricians, explanations for men’s dominance of these fields are easily generated with reference to other job requirements that are culturally masculine (technical and spatial skills, for example). Difference-based explanations for sex segregation are readily available because most jobs require diverse skills and aptitudes, some equated with masculinity, some with femininity.

LOOKING FORWARD

What then might be done to increase women’s presence in STEM fields? One plausible strategy involves changes to the structure of secondary education. Some evidence suggests more girls and women complete degrees in math and science in educational systems where curricular choice is restricted or delayed; all students might take mathematics and science throughout their high-school years or the school might use performance-based tracking and course
placement. Although such policies are at odds with Western ideals of individual choice and self-expression, they may weaken penetration of gender stereotypes during the impressionable adolescent years.

Of course, the most obvious means of achieving greater integration of STEM is to avoid reinforcing stereotypes about what girls and boys like and what they are good at. Cultural shifts of this sort occur only gradually, but some change can be seen on the horizon. The rise of “geek chic” may be one sign. Aiming to liberate teen-aged girls from the girls-can’t-do-math and male-math-nerd stereotypes, television star and self-proclaimed math geek Danica McKellar has written three how-to math books, most recently Hot X: Algebra Exposed, presenting math as both feminine and fun. Even Barbie has been updated. In contrast to her math-fearing Teen Talk sister of the early 1990s, the new Computer Engineer Barbie, released in December 2010, comes decked out in a tight t-shirt printed in binary code and equipped with a smart phone and a pink laptop. Of course, one potential pitfall of this math-is-feminine strategy is that it risks swapping one set of stereotypes for another.

So, what gender is science? In short, it depends. When occupations or fields are segregated by sex, most people suspect it reflects fields’ inherently masculine or feminine task content. But this presumption is belied by substantial cross-national variability in the gender composition of fields, STEM in particular. Moreover, this variability follows surprising patterns. Whereas most people would expect to find many more female engineers in the U.S. and Sweden than in Colombia and Bulgaria, new data suggest that precisely the opposite is true.

Ironically, the freedom of choice that’s so celebrated in affluent Western democracies seems to help construct and give agency to stereotypically gendered “selves.” Self-segregation of careers may occur because some believe they’re naturally good at gender-conforming activities (attempting to build on their strengths), because they believe that certain fields will be seen as appropriate for people like them (“doing” gender), or because they believe they’ll enjoy gender-conforming fields more than gender-nonconforming ones (realizing their “true selves”). It’s just that, by encouraging individual self-expression in post-materialist societies, we may also effectively promote the development and expression of culturally gendered selves.

**Recommended Resources**


Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West (eds.), *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change* (Routledge, 2002). Explores how and why people reproduce gender (and race and class) stereotypes in everyday interactions.


Yu Xie and Kimberlee A. Shauman, *Women in Science: Career Processes and Outcomes* (Harvard University Press, 2003). Uses data from middle school to mid-career to study the forces that lead fewer American women than men into science and engineering fields.
Introduction to Reading 20

This reading provides an in-depth and theoretical analysis of ways we “do” gender in everyday activities, thus supporting the gender structure of our collective lives. Matthew B. Ezzell spent 13 months as a participant observer studying a women’s rugby team at a large, public university in the southeastern United States. He identified himself as a “white, (pro)feminist man” who recognized his position of privilege in our society. This created both problems and advantages as he carried out his research. The women on this team were very open while, at the same time, testing their performance of emphasized femininity on him—a member of the White, male audience, the target of their displays of gender. Notice the various strategies the women used to enforce appropriate gendered performances for themselves and other players on their team.

1. What is the advantage to these women of “defensive othering”?
2. How does the context described in this article that supports traditional forms of gender differ from the context in the pool in the Musto article?
3. As you read through this article, think about the ways we do gender. Try to come up with other situations in which women may participate in “identifying with the dominants” and thus reinforce traditional patterns of gender.

“Barbie Dolls” on the Pitch

Identity Work, Defensive Othering, and Inequality in Women’s Rugby

Matthew B. Ezzell

Identities are the “meanings one attributes to oneself as an object” (Burke and Tully 1977:883). Michael L. Schwalbe and Douglas Mason-Schrock (1996) expound on this understanding by focusing on identity claims as “indexes of the self” (p. 115). By this, they mean that identities are not meanings in and of themselves, but signs that individuals and groups use to evoke meanings in the form of responses from others. Identities, then, are signifiers of the self. They are not fixed, as if they were personality traits, but mutable consequences of reflection and interaction (Blumer 1969; McCall and Simmons 1978; Strauss 1959). Accordingly, individuals and groups can work on their identities. Identity work is “anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:115).

Race, class, and gender, as Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987) and West and Sarah...
Fenstermaker (1995) have argued, are interlocking systems of oppression; moreover, they are the social arrangements from which we derive our core identities. This view implies that identity creation and affirmation are parts of the process whereby inequality is reproduced. The study of identity work, thus, has the potential to yield insight into the processes that uphold large-scale inequalities. Conversely, we can learn about social change by studying the dynamics of identity change (see, e.g., Stryker, Owens, and White 2000).

What happens when, as part of their identity work, members of subordinated groups act in ways that challenge dominants’ expectations for their groups, yet seek approval from dominants? How do they manage this potential dilemma? I examine these questions through an ethnographic analysis of collegiate female athletes, addressing how they resist and reproduce inequality through interaction. Specifically, I analyze how a group of female rugby players, responding to subordinated status and the stigma that arose from their transgression of conventional gendered norms, managed their identities as women, as athletes, and, for most of them, as heterosexuals. Some of their strategies fall into the category of “defensive othering.” This occurs when subordinates “[accept] the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then [say], in effect, ‘There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me’” (Schwalbe et al. 2000:425). Michael Schwalbe and associates include defensive othering as one of the generic processes in the reproduction of inequality. They note:

To call these processes “generic” does not imply that they are unaffected by context. It means, rather, that they occur in multiple contexts wherein social actors face similar or analogous problems. The precise form a process takes in any given setting is a matter for empirical determination. (p. 421)

This paper offers such an empirical analysis within a specific context. I expand on the work of Schwalbe and associates by adding two subcategories of defensive othering, offering insights into how inequality is reproduced through face-to-face interaction. In particular, I analyze how the players (a) identified with dominants (identifying with the values associated with dominant group members) and (b) engaged in what I call normative identification (identifying with the normative values prescribed by dominants for subordinated group members). Also, I discuss how the players deflected stigma through a boundary maintenance process I call propping up dominants (reinforcing the idea that dominant group members are, and should be, dominant).

In brief, I offer a situated analysis of the processes of identity management in a sexist and homophobic context. The female “ruggers” at the heart of this study were successful athletes throughout high school, but they did not make it onto varsity collegiate teams in their high school sports. Rugby provided an attractive alternative. A nationally competitive, yet nonvarsity sport at their university, rugby is unique among women’s sports in having the same rules and equipment as the men’s game. The sport offered identity resources for the women, as athletes, because of its hypermasculine structure and style of play. These same aspects of the game, however, exposed the players, as women, to sexist and homophobic stigma from outsiders. In response to the conditions under which they interacted, the players worked to create a seemingly contradictory (collective) identity that was simultaneously tough, fit, feminine, and heterosexual. It is an identity I call heterosexy-fit.

The players’ construction and accomplishment of this identity challenged the notion that women are passive and incompetent at a male-defined activity (sports), but also unintentionally reinforced ideas and practices that contribute to women’s subordination. In this sense, the identity work of the women at the heart of this study is similar to the “apologetic” model of resistance (when women “apologize” for their gendered transgressions by emphasizing other conventional aspects of gender presentation and performance) found among female athletes (see Broad
I argue that the heterosex-fit identity of the female ruggers in the current study represents an updated version of “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987) that combines toughness, assertiveness, and hard-body athleticism along with more conventional feminine qualities. This expands on the “contemporary emphasized femininity” found among female cheerleaders (Adams and Bettis 2003; Grindstaff and West 2006), athletes in a sport in which performed femininity is part of the sport itself. Further, my findings stand in sharp contrast to research on other women’s rugby teams, which has largely focused on the sport as a site of transgressive (Chase 2006; Howe 2003; Wheatley 1994) and “unapologetic” queer (Broad 2001) resistance. Throughout the paper, I will highlight the features of the specific context in which my participants interacted that shaped their identity work in ways to mark them as unique within the world of women’s rugby.

Finally, this is a case study of a single rugby team, and it is not my intention to generalize my findings to the population of female rugby players, particularly given the uniqueness of this team within the larger rugby culture. Instead, I use the data from this case to cull the strategies of identity work that members of any subordinated group may use when they challenge prescribed norms for their group but still seek the approval of dominants.

* * *

**SPORT AND DEFENSIVE OTHERING**

Historically, one coping strategy for subordinated group members working within systems of oppression and privilege is the imitation of dominants (Miller 1976). Because these systems are dominated by, identified with, and centered on members of the oppressor class (Johnson 2006), this involves taking on and/or supporting the norms, values, and behaviors of that class (see Gramsci 1971). At times, members of subordinated groups may engage in defensive othering—reinforcing the power of stigmatizing labels by arguing that the label is true for other members of their social category, but not for themselves. . . .

Members of subordinated groups may use defensive othering to specifically deflect resistance to their participation in dominant-identified institutions. One such institution for women in Western societies is sport (Bolin and Granskog 2003; Burstyn 1999; Heywood and Dworkin 2003; Lenskyj 1986; Lorber 1994; Messner 1990). Women’s participation in sport challenges the essentialist equation of femininity with physical weakness and passivity. Historically, the institution has been a core site for boys’ and men’s socialization into and performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; Messner 2002). Not surprisingly, female athletes’ participation has been met with resistance by many men and some women. Pat Griffin (1992) notes that women who were caught watching male athletes competing in the early Greek Olympics were put to death. Men justified women’s exclusion from and restriction within sport (and other core institutions) based on medical and paternalistic arguments about protecting women’s health and reproductive functions. Over time, the rhetorics evolved, taking on a heterosexist frame. Men positioned athletic women as dangerous and masculinized lesbians. This was done, Griffin notes, as a means of social control to keep women in the roles of wife and mother. It also worked to reinscribe a belief in “natural” differences between men and women that legitimate gender inequalities. . . .

Female athletes have responded to sexist and heterosexist stigma in a variety of ways. Griffin highlights strategies female athletes use to confront the stigma—for example, education campaigns, lesbian/queer visibility, and heterosexual/homosexual solidarity—and strategies they use to reproduce or accommodate the stigma—for example, silence, denial, and attacks on lesbians.
in sport. An additional strategy of accommodation is apology, when female athletes “compensate” for their sport participation by emphasizing traditional notions of white, middle-class femininity and heterosexuality (see Broad 2001; Felshin 1974; Griffin 1992, 1998; Messner 2002; Sabo 1993). Apologetics are institutionalized in athletic practices like cheerleading (see Adams and Bettis 2003; Grindstaff and West 2006), in which female participants are encouraged or required to wear short skirts, don makeup, and smile while performing athletic and acrobatic movements that require stamina and technical skill. As Laura Grindstaff and Emily West (2006) argue, this represents a contemporary version of emphasized femininity that combines athleticism with a (hetero)sexualized performance of normative femininity (see also Heywood and Dworkin 2003). As the current study demonstrates, in addition to being performed through gender display, apologetics can be enacted through defensive othering: Those other female athletes may be “mannish lesbians,” but not me.

Research on female athletes in a range of sports reveals resistance to conventional gendered and sexual norms and expectations alongside the adoption of apologetics. This represents the athletes’ active and tense negotiations of masculinity and femininity, resistance, and reproduction (see, notably, Cahn 1994; Griffin 1998). Yet researchers have found a different process in studies of women’s rugby. P. David Howe (2003), Elizabeth E. Wheatley (1994), and Laura Frances Chase (2006) found the sport, a traditionally male-defined and -identified practice, to be a site of transgressive resistance for female athletes. They argued that their participants challenged sport’s status as a “male domain” (Howe 2003:242), created a vision of “sport in general (and of rugby, specifically) that provides an alternative to male-centered, -defined, -controlled, and -practiced sport” (Wheatley 1994:207), and resisted “dominant discourses of normative femininity” (Chase 2006:232). Additionally, K. L. Broad (2001) found her participants to adopt a queer “unapologetic” resistance comprised of “transgressing gender, destabilizing the heterosexual/homosexual binary, and ‘in your face’ confrontations of stigma” (p. 182). Rugby, it would seem, offers fertile ground for resistance.

I found, however, a more complicated engagement with strategies of resistance and reproduction on the Comp U Women’s Rugby Football Club. In the following sections, I show how the Comp U ruggers, subordinated by men as women and as female athletes, engaged in defensive othering by identifying with dominants and disidentifying with women outside of their team. The players identified with dominants by positioning themselves as closer to men and men’s style of play within the institution of sport relative to nonathletic women generally and to female athletes outside of rugby specifically. They engaged in normative identification by positioning themselves as closer to conventional notions of femininity and heterosexuality than other female ruggers. Finally, the players propped up dominants by reasserting the superiority of men as athletes and as the standard for athletic play. These strategies emerged when the players ran head-on into stereotypes about female athletes—particularly female rugby players—both on and off campus.

Identifying With Dominants

Given the historical association between (white, middle class) women and physical weakness and passivity, many women have interpreted their sport practice as an act of resistance (see, e.g., Heywood and Dworkin 2003). The female ruggers at Comp U, however, did not do this. Even as their success on the pitch (the rugby playing field) shattered the belief that all women are passive, the players used their athleticism to suggest that only they, and not women as a class, were tough and aggressive. Further, they used their status as ruggers to position themselves above women in general, whom they dismissed as weak. In doing so the players identified with dominants, claiming a heightened status relative to other members of their subordinated group.
(women) through closer identification with the behavior and traits associated with members of the dominant class (men).

To contest the image of themselves, as women, as being weak, the female ruggers distinguished themselves from women in (white) sororities. Frequently, the Comp U players referred to these women as “sorostitutes.” This term—combining “sorority” and “prostitute”—implied promiscuity on the part of sorority women. Yet, the Comp U players commonly engaged in bantering, joking, and bragging about drunken sexual escapades. They did not believe, moreover, that the women in sororities literally sold sex acts. In fact, it was the ruggers themselves who held an eroticized mud wrestling fundraiser annually, selling access to the sexual display of their bodies as the most lucrative fundraiser of the year. Why, then, did the Comp U ruggers sexually libel women in sororities?

The players’ reasons for setting up “sorostitutes” as a foil became clearer when they created a t-shirt listing the “Top Ten Reasons to Play on the Comp U Women’s Rugby Football Club.” One reason was: “You just laugh when people ask what sorority you’re in.” I asked Frankie, a vet player, what this meant and she explained that (white) “sorority girls in general are stereotyped to be, you know, like, pancy girly-girls, makeup all the time, and that kind of stuff.” Yet most, if not all, of the Comp U players wore makeup (for some, even during games) and were invested in the same conventionally feminine appearance that sorority women projected. Moreover, women on the rugby team spoke glowingly about how rugby offered the same benefits for which sororities are often celebrated (see Robbins 2004): a sense of community and belonging, social outlets in the forms of parties and dances, and social networks that could offer payoffs in the future. Also, both groups were predominantly white and middle to upper middle class. These similarities with nonathletic (“girly-girl”) sorority women potentially threatened the Comp U players’ identities as tough and aggressive. In response, they asserted that despite similarities in their gender presentation, they were different from—and superior to—women in sororities because they were not “pansies” (weak). The Comp U players, then, claimed a closer association to the dominant (masculine) persona.

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The players put forward the identity of “ruger,” and its attendant toughness, as an expression of their true athletic self. They did this by creating a life narrative in which their previous sport participation, though extensive and positive, was lacking. In this way, they projected a consistent self in the face of not making it onto collegiate varsity teams in their previous sports. As they spoke, the players cast themselves as too competitive for the less (physically) demanding sports they had played in high school. Many noted that they were “always angry” as children, were “too aggressive” for other sports, or “always wanted to hit people.”

When I asked in interviews about what made a good rugby player, the women responded: “an aggressive personality,” “an anger management problem to work out,” “someone really intense,” “a competitive personality,” “it’s just in their genes,” or someone “with that little bit of craziness in ’em.” The players thus justified their claim to the rugger identity by naturalizing aggression and competition: This is who I am. Female rugby players, in this account, are not just different from other female athletes; they are better. Carter, one of the coaches, echoed these sentiments in an interview: “You get girls who play soccer and play basketball and you get them to come out here and stand on the sidelines and watch this and you tell me how many of them will raise their hands and say they want to try it: Not very many.”

Were the players tough? By many measures of successful rugby play (see Schacht 1996), they were. They valorized hard tackles and played through pain and injury, sometimes incurring permanent damage to their bodies. They policed dirty play by opponents with targeted hits and other forms of retribution that sometimes left opposing players unconscious or sent
them to the hospital. And, they taunted their defeated opponents. Tammie, who refused treatment for torn shoulder ligaments for over a year in order to continue playing, famously tackled a player who had been “talking trash” during the game, then stood over her and yelled, “Get up, bitch; I’m not done with you yet!” Words like “bitch” are used in traditionally male sports to denigrate boys and men who show a lack of aggression or masculinity (Messner 2002). Some women attempt to claim the word as a sign of toughness, or to undermine its stigmatizing power by “choosing” it (see Miya-Jervis and Zeisler 2007). By using this word to subordinate her opponent, however, Tammie adopted and reinforced this sexist theme of the larger institution of sport and positioned the Comp U team, and Comp U players, as masculine (tough) in relation to their feminine (weak) opponents.

Normative Identification

Marilyn Frye (1983) notes that the socially constructed lines dividing dominant and subordinated groups are vigilantly policed, often by members of both groups. When members of subordinated groups cross these lines, they may experience backlash and social sanction. She notes that homophobia is used as a policing resource to maintain sex inequality. Faced with such threats, women (or members of other subordinated groups) may engage in normative identification, aligning themselves with the norms and values prescribed by dominants for a subordinated group.

To the extent that the Comp U players made successful claims to an essential toughness in comparison to women in general as well as other female athletes, they created a dilemma for themselves. Historically, athletic women have been stereotyped as masculine lesbians (Blinde and Taub 1992; Griffin 1992). The very things that made rugby attractive as a resource for the players’ identity work—its pervasive physicality and its similarity to the men’s game—made the Comp U players vulnerable to such labeling. The players were keenly aware of this. When I asked them about the dominant view of female ruggers, they said, in matter-of-fact or angry tones: “scary, butch lesbians,” “she-males,” “he-shes,” “lesbian man-beasts,” and “butch, big—definitely gay.” Many players reported experiencing intense resistance from their parents. One player told me that when she told her mother she was playing rugby, her mother responded, “Isn’t that a dyke sport?” They also ran into social sanction from friends. Peg, a fourth-year player known on the team for her aggressive play, told me that when one of her male friends heard her talking about playing rugby he said, “Peg, if you turn out to be a lesbian, I’ll kill you.” He was “joking,” but Peg received the message of his sanction loud and clear. Comp U players did not say that these stereotypes were false or try to strip them of their stigmatizing power. They asserted only that the stereotypes did not apply to them.

Comp U players positioned themselves as the exception to the rule by emphasizing their conformity to traditional notions of white, middle class, heterosexual femininity—what Griffin (1992) calls “promoting a heterosexy image” (p. 252)—in their style of dress and appearance on and off the pitch. They thus engaged in normative identification. The players essentialized their femininity and heterosexuality, claiming them as natural expressions of their selves. Additionally, they privileged their smaller physical size—in comparison to female rugby players on other teams—as a mark of their hard work and dedication to the sport, treating their bodies as social projects—objects that are shaped, scrutinized, and negotiated (see Bourdieu 1984; Brumberg 1997; Foucault 1977). They saw themselves as both essentially different (heterosexual and feminine) from other female ruggers, as well as relationally superior athletes as a result of their accomplished fitness.

Essential Femininity and Heterosexuality

Conventional femininity carries with it compulsory heterosexuality (Frye 1983; Griffin 1992; Rich 1994). One way for women to
engage in normative identification as an attempt to please the dominant group (or at least not alienate them) while breaking other gendered norms is to make an appeal to their own “natural” femininity and heterosexuality. More than simply “apologizing” for the transgression by emphasizing other conventional gendered norms, this strategy involves claiming those norms as an essential aspect of the self. The women on the Comp U rugby team, coming up against expressed and internalized sanctions for their tough and aggressive (unfeminine) rugby play, did exactly this.

During interactions at practices and games, the players negotiated and policed acceptable gender and sexual performances for each other and for the team as a whole. For example, at a game early in the season, Doris, a newbie, saw an opposing player whose biological sex she could not clearly identify. She asked Carter, one of the coaches, if there were any coed teams: He answered, “No, there are no coed teams. In women’s rugby, you’ll see a lot of interesting-looking women, but they are always women.” Maeve, a vet player, said “They’re all technically women.” Doris laughed.

. . . Such comments positioned the Comp U team as the exception and, as the comments came from veteran players, modeled acceptable gender performances for the newbies. A few of the Comp U players self-identified as lesbian or bisexual and two of the players were openly dating one another, but the team, as a collectivity, presented itself as heterosexual.

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[A]s noted earlier, naturalized aggression was the most common account I heard from players when I asked how they came to play rugby. This account worked to validate the athletes’ claim to the identity of tough rugby player; but, it also came close to outsiders’ beliefs that all lesbians are aggressive, hence all female rugby players are lesbians. Susie dealt with this problem by essentializing the feminine gender performance of this team: “we just tend to be effeminate people.”

Comp U players often claimed that they were special because, in addition to being tough, they were also heterosexual and feminine—closer to normative expectations of (white, middle class) women than other female ruggers. Importantly, the overwhelmingly white status of the team enabled their use of this strategy. Black women are typically stereotyped as more “masculine” than white women (Collins 2004; Kaplan 1987), and may not have been able to draw on this strategy in the same ways. Thus, the players used their racial identities, here and elsewhere, as a buffer in their identity work.

Time and again, in practices and in interviews, players touted the “diversity” on the team and noted how welcoming the club was to anyone who was serious about the sport. Seeing the team as “open” may have been important for the players because it suggested that they were good people. Despite their claims of inclusivity, though, the players were disproportionately “feminine” in appearance, white, and heterosexual. This had not always been the case.

The third- and fourth-year players remembered a time when the team was less heterosexual and feminine identified and fractured along lines of sexuality (the racial makeup of the team, though, had consistently been white dominated). According to Susie: “there was a big division on the team between the straight girls and the lesbians on the team . . . I mean, they wouldn’t stay in the same rooms in the hotels and stuff. It was a big issue.”

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[T]here was a conscious decision to move away from a lesbian, or lesbian-perceived, collective identity (and lesbian-identified players) in order to attract and please rugby men. Vet players socialized the newbies to adopt this account. When I asked Tina, a newbie, what she had heard about the previous tension, she said, “somebody told me one time the whole reason was because the team used to be composed of all angst-ridden, butch, man-hating lesbians.”
Two players, both respected and valued athletes on the team who fit the privileged heterosex-fit presentation of self, began openly dating during my research. Importantly, they did not self-identify as lesbians. Hannah, one of the women, explained to me, “I’m not a lesbian, but I’m dating Wendy . . . That’s our major thing. We’re like, why do you need the label?” Still, after they went public with their relationship, Frankie, who was Christian identified, told them they were “going to hell.” Her intervention was not well-received by the team. Joanne, a respected fourth-year player, said, “That was tough for a while. People were really angry with Frankie because of that. We don’t want that.”

The Comp U female ruggers were invested in a collective heterosexual identity. They were not, however, intolerant homophobes allergic to any sign of lesbianism. The problem was the homophobic context that compelled them to publicly distance themselves from the stigma and stereotypes attached to their sport.

Why would the heterosexual-identified players give so much weight to the male players’ response? Female athletes—and female rugby players in particular—are stereotyped as butch lesbians, so the heterosexual-identified players said they feared that most men would not be attracted to them. Male rugby players, in this context, became even more important as potential dating partners. Frankie put it simply: “I think that a girl rugby player is intimidating for a lot of guys, except for the guy rugby players.” The women, then, tried to recruit players who would be deemed attractive to heterosexual men. Eden, a second-year player, said, “It’s just like, we’ve kind of, over the years, weeded them [physically larger, lesbian-identified players] out and kind of replaced them with girls that are more like us and athletic and everything.” This highlights the importance of recruitment as a resource for the team’s collective identity.

The players’ belief in an already reduced dating pool was compounded by the fact that female students were the majority at Comp U. The players reported that “the ratio” created fierce competition for men as dating partners. Mo, a second-year player, told me that a popular men’s magazine had described the women at Comp U as “goddesses.” Given the players’ ages and the undergraduate culture of romance (see Holland and Eisenhart 1990), it makes sense that dating was important to them. Because outsiders stereotype female rugby players as masculine lesbians, and “goddesses” were their competition for dates, it is not surprising that they emphasized feminine and heterosexual signifiers on and off the pitch. Surprising or not, their use of defensive othering relied on and reinforced heteronormative ideals of body presentation and performance.

Accomplishing Fitness

In another example of defensive othering through normative identification, the players positioned themselves as better than other female ruggers because of their smaller physical size and greater commitment to fitness, qualities closer to normative understandings of “femininity.” To claim these qualities, players used a contradictory mix of essentialist and social constructionist rhetoric.

Throughout my observations, players repeatedly told me how physically different—that is, smaller and more “fit”—their members were compared to other women’s rugby teams. The players granted toughness, seemingly by default, to all female ruggers through their assertions of a naturalized aggression as the foundation of rugby play. But being “fit”—a body presentation that often necessitates the middle class privileges of gym memberships, flexible schedules, and access to sports teams and equipment—was an accomplishment reached through hard work. The players’ idea of fitness (strong, yet smaller and...
thin) located them closer to conventional understandings of white, middle class femininity (and, thus, heterosexuality) and reaffirmed their claims of difference from nonathletic (unfit) women in general. . . .

Being “fit” and not “fat” was something for which this team was known. In fact, as many players and both coaches told me with pride, Comp U players were called “The Barbie Dolls” within the national rugby community. Male players from opposing teams applauded the Comp U women during warm-ups before games, calling out: “Let’s hear it for the hottest rugby team in the South!” And, male business associates of one of the coaches, after seeing images of the team, remarked: “There’s no way those girls play rugby!” Told that the “girls” did just that, the men said, “Tell your girls that the boys from New Jersey say hello.”

Players reinforced team norms for body size through their informal interactions. In the middle of the fall semester of 2002, the vet players on the Comp U team held an initiation for the newbies, attended by both the men’s and the women’s teams. As part of the evening’s events, the vets required the newbies to dress up as characters and perform skits. . . .

Not being “fit”—being larger than the “size-zero bod[ies]” on the Comp U team—was regarded with derision and contempt.

In these ways the players used a rhetoric of accomplishment, in addition to their appeals to an essential toughness and heterosexuality, to position themselves as superior to other female ruggers, other female athletes, and nonathletic women—an updated version of emphasized femininity I call heterosexy-fit. . . .

This heterosexy-fit identity emerged out of the contradictions between “tough” and “feminine,” the seemingly incompatible identities to which the players made simultaneous claim. It was enabled by the team’s whiteness and middle class privileges, and it was a rewarding identity in a variety of ways. Constructing it relied, however, on the devaluation of other female athletes and women in general. The defensive othering of the women ruggers thus helped to maintain women’s status as others within the dominant gender order.

PROPPING UP DOMINANTS

In addition to defensive othering, maintaining boundaries between dominant and subordinate groups is an essential component of the reproduction of inequality (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Boundary maintenance allows members of dominant groups to hoard resources, and is thus not usually in the interest of subordinates. But, because the Comp U players saw the rugby men as comprising a small and threatened dating pool, they had an investment in protecting their access to these men. Their identity work as tough athletes challenged the conventional equation of women with physical weakness and passivity, thus pushing them closer to the status of men. This could have been interpreted as unattractive by rugby men, and the Comp U female ruggers worried that it did. To position themselves above other women by virtue of their toughness, but still below men, the players maintained the boundary between men and women by propping up dominants—(re)asserting the superiority of dominant group members. The female players, in short, put men forward as essentially superior athletes.

As mentioned earlier, the female ruggers at Comp U were proud of the fact that they played by the same rules as the men. However, they did not want to play against or with the men. Tammie said:

I’m not this kind of person that thinks, “Oh, girls should be able to play with the boys if they want to.” No. Like, I would never step on that field and play full-contact rugby with the boys. They’re so much stronger than me I would get killed, you know? . . . ‘Cause I mean, yeah, there is that level of difference there and nobody can do anything about it . . . I’m just happy I can play exactly what they play, just on my level.

To the women, the men were the more valued rugby players, and the women sought higher
status by approaching, but not surpassing, the men’s style of play as the standard. The men’s valued status was evident when I asked Tammie why she liked playing by the same rules as the men: “I think it’s a big deal because I think men’s rugby teams really respect you for it.” Joanne said, “Men’s games are a lot more fast-paced. I mean, obviously, we’re not ever gonna be able to sprint quite as fast.” She, like Tammie, reinforced the idea of men’s natural athletic prowess.

Not wanting to be tackled by an opponent who is physically larger and stronger is understandable. And male athletes, on average, may be faster than female athletes. But reinforcing the men’s superiority in these ways worked as a form of boundary maintenance that lessened the potential threat the women posed to the men, thus increasing the female players’ desirability. Yes, the women were tough athletes on the pitch, but they were tough with other women, not with men. In addition to maintaining the boundary between women and men, this strategy reasserted the women’s specialness by distancing them from other female athletes who believe that women can do anything that men do. Jana derisively described such players as “super unathletic” (unfit) and “definite feminists,” in contrast to the “fit” and apolitical ruggers on the Comp U team.

Carter put it simply: “There’s a big gap between [men’s and women’s] playing ability.”

I asked both coaches what accounted for the differences they had noted between the men’s and women’s games and styles of play. They highlighted a mix of nature and nurture. They said there were inherent differences between men’s and women’s physical abilities and “drives,” but they acknowledged that social conditioning also played a role. Their message to the players, however, was clear: Real ruggers are men and the women’s game is derivative and, thus, second class.

Men’s and women’s bodies fall along a continuum of human differences; however, there are average differences between them. The most valued sports, in terms of media coverage and funding, are typically organized through rules, strategies, and norms that privilege men’s bodies (Messner 2002). This does not mean that men are inherently better athletes. It only means that what is valued in sport reflects the premium put on size, strength, and masculine behavior.

By propping up dominants, Comp U’s female players (with help from their coaches) strengthened their claim to a heterosexy-fit identity that did not threaten men or male dominance. They positioned themselves and their sport as exceptional in that they (and it) were tough and aggressive, while they were also feminine, heterosexual, and sexy. They “knew their place” (below men), and thus could be desirable to men.

**Conclusion**

The female rugby players at Comp U were successful athletes in high school, but found themselves unable to compete in their chosen sports at the varsity level at Comp U. So they turned to rugby, an intensely physical yet nonvarsity sport, as an alternative. They stepped onto the pitch and met with success, only to find themselves stigmatized by outsiders as “butch lesbians.” Instead of resisting and rejecting the power of such stigma, as others have found female rugby players to do, the Comp U players turned to defensive othering, casting themselves as the exception to the stereotype, and thereby unintentionally reinforcing the dominant heterosexist ideology. In doing so, they created a unique identity as heterosexy-fit—simultaneously tough, heterosexual, and conventionally attractive.

The women’s presentation of the heterosexy-fit identity helped them respond to sexist and homophobic stigma and backlash to women’s participation in sport. They wanted to be seen as tough and serious athletes without sacrificing their sexual appeal to men. To some extent they succeeded. For example, the heterosexy-fit identity...
insulated them from outsiders’ negative beliefs; granted them higher status relative to other women, other athletic women generally, and other female ruggers in particular; and, promoted an individual and collective presentation of self they personally valued and saw as desirable to rugby men. The women did not create the conditions of inequality under which they acted, nor did they create the devalued identities imposed on them. Understandably, they managed their identities in ways that promoted a sense of self-worth and affirmation. However, their solution to the identity dilemmas they faced reinforced the stigmatizing power of the devalued identities they sought to deflect.

NOTES

1. Miller (1976) discusses the tendency for some subordinated group members to imitate dominants in various forms. The process I highlight here is an example of that.

2. Although the players did not use the term heterosex-fit, it reflects the constellation of meanings they sought to attach to themselves. This identity is similar to the identity constructed and performed by the moderate weightlifters that Shari Dworkin (2001) studied who “actively pressed beyond thinness ideals but also feared masculinization and what might be considered a loss of heterosexual attractiveness” (p. 346).

3. I am indebted to the comments of an anonymous reviewer for emphasizing this point.

4. Some might argue that such a statement is a challenge to essentialist understandings of sexual identity, one that calls into question the heterosexual/homosexual binary. While such an analysis makes sense, my data do not suggest any degree of intentionality on Hannah’s part toward such an end, and internalized homophobia within the homophobic context of the team may be a more appropriate reading. In interviews and in team interaction, the players conflated “lesbian” with “feminist,” “man-hating,” and “butch.”

5. As Lorber (1993) notes, these average differences in strength and speed may largely be due to gender socialization and conditioning. For example, in the first twenty years of women’s marathon competition, they “reduced their finish times by more than one-and-one-half hours” (p. 570).

REFERENCES


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Topics for Further Examination

- Go to the main websites for Girl Scouts (http://www.girlscouts.org) and Boy Scouts (http://www.boyscouts.org) and compare the two organizations. Are their programs similar or different? What similarities and differences do you observe in the websites themselves? What gender-related changes have they made recently?
- Go to the U.S. Department of Education website (http://www.ed.gov) and search for differences in men and women in higher education. Look for tables that list majors or graduation rates by sex.
- Do a search for the Women's National Rugby Foundation to learn more about the sport and its history in the United States. Also look up another, typically male sport that females now play, such as “women’s” basketball or ice hockey. What makes them a “women’s” sport?