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## Gender Neutral Parenting: Raising a Generation Outside the Gender Binary

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Gender Neutral Parenting: Raising a Generation Outside the Gender Binary

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Anthropology

by

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University of California, Santa Barbara  
Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, 2018

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

In the United States, the social and cultural reality remains organized around the gender binary. The binary legitimizes itself on the widely held belief that gender is determined by biology and, therefore, is “natural.” By exploring and firmly placing gender as a cultural construct, this thesis looks at the possibilities of fracturing the binary. Borrowing from Stephan Hirschauer (1994) and Judith Butler’s (2004), this thesis theorizes what a gender neutral world could look like and examines how Gender Neutral Parents contribute toward a gender revolution. Gender Neutral Parents, a community that is mostly found online, represent a small group that is trying to break the harmful cycle that reifies the gender binary by removing gender from early socialization of their children. These parents re-do the relationship kinship has with gender by de-emphasizing sexual differences, creating inclusive language, and de-gendering material and visual culture. Their impacts on the gender binary are inconclusive, but their revolutionizing how the family interacts with gender opening more possibilities for a gender reform without limits.

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## **Section 1: Introduction**

In the U.S., gender has undergone considerable transformation including the increase of gender equality and inclusion, but the COVID-19 pandemic threw a harsh spotlight on the persistence of gender inequality. During lockdown women left the workforce in droves to care for their children and already disadvantaged non-binary identities faced increasing economic instability and barriers to healthcare (Hackney& Carroll,2022; Woulfe & Wald, 2020). These examples alone illustrate the need to continually resist and reform the gender social structure that remains pervasive to this day. This issue brings about the question: what would happen if challenging these ingrained concepts started before a human ever learned of the gender binary? Gender Neutral Parenting is one such avenue to examine the potential to raise a generation with completely novel gendered realities, one that views the gender structure as equal and diverse. To understand the impacts, this thesis examines how gender, kinship, and the social structure are related and what role parents plays within this system.

To achieve personhood within any given sociocultural context, an individual must master a myriad of social and cultural categories that make them recognizable. Many of these categories change over time, but gender is often the earliest “social category children master” and is considered a stable, fixed state of existence throughout their lifetime (Mahler 2013:85). Today, gender is thought of as the binary social and culturally established identities of “men” and “women.” With these constructs forced upon children so early, there is common confusion with the gender binary as the “natural” differences between the sexes:

Sociologists studied how babies assigned to the male category are encouraged to engage in masculine behaviors. They were offered boy-appropriate toys, rewarded for playing with them, and punished for acting in girlish ways. Babies assigned to the female

category are encouraged to engage in feminine behaviors, and were limited to girl-appropriate toys, such as dolls and Easy Bake Ovens (Weitzman et al. 1972). The result of this endemic socialization is what creates the illusion that gender is naturally occurring (Risman 2018: 14).

Gender within culture, like so many other categories, becomes “second nature,” which means doing gender is almost a reflex, often leading to the perception gender is essential to human nature, and that nature determines gender. Despite this misconception, gender-appropriate rules are not universal across all cultures, further highlighting the culturally constructed origin of gender. The West largely believes in a binary gender/sex system in which males and females are the primary categories with nonbinary identities being labeled as “queer” or “other”. On the other hand, cultures like the indigenous Samoans recognize three or four genders that include male, female, fa’afafine, and fa’afatama (Schmidt, 2003). Fa’afafine and fa’afatama are still considered part of the normative gender/sex system in Samoa in which biological sex and gender are not conflated with one another. The fa’afafine and fa’afatama are generally socially accepted and serve as a direct contradiction to Western beliefs that there are, and can only be, two genders.<sup>1</sup> The rules of gender then cannot be “natural” when interpreted so differently, with plenty of contradictions, in practice and across cultures.

If gender is not a fact of nature, humans can create and modify gender altogether. Gender Neutral Parents in the United States are one group that hope to re-do gender where the category itself becomes neutral in form and function. These parents reject the belief in the biological destiny of sex and choose to let their children instead form their identity without the limitations

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<sup>1</sup> The impacts of globalization and Western influences have led to the increasing marginalization of fa’afafine as they are increasingly sexualized and, with the infiltration of Western Christian discourse in Samoa, “has led to marked disapproval of anything that might be interpreted as homosexuality – the obvious target in Samoa being fa’afafine” (Schmidt 426: 2003).

placed on them with the categories of “boy” and “girl”. They take these cultural rules and decide not to pass them down to their children, effectively opening the possibility to create new gender rules or dismantle them entirely. They themselves are actively thinking through the terms gender neutral and may or may not use them in their everyday lives, even as they affiliate themselves with the movement. Outcomes of Gender Neutral Parenting in the long run have yet to be fully realized, regardless, these parents are renegotiating the terms in which they and their children understand gender, one that is expands gender beyond a binary understanding. Thus, these parents are transforming gender in the United States.

**Section 2: Background and Methods**

A 2021 study by the UCLA Williams Institute estimates there are about 1.2 million Americans that identify as nonbinary.

**Table 1. Nonbinary LGBTQ adult population estimates**

NONBINARY LGBTQ ADULTS AGES 18 - 60	
% (95% CI*) of LGBTQ adult population	11.1 (9.3, 13.2)
% (95% CI) of cis LGBTQ adults	7.5 (5.9, 9.5)
% (95% CI) of transgender adult population (across sexual orientations)	32.1 (24.8, 40.4)
Number of nonbinary LGBTQ adults in the U.S., including transgender and cisgender people (N [95% CI])	1,219,000 (1,000,000; 1,481,000)

Nonbinary LGBTQ Adults in the United States (June 2021)  
THE WILLIAMS INSTITUTE

*Figure 1: The Williams Institute 2021*

Nonbinary identities are people whose “genders that are too complicated to place in the “man” or “woman” category, identifying outside of the gender binary system (Darwin 2022:5). Their existence contradicts the underlying gender binary’s logic and their fight for recognition led me to the topic of Gender Neutral Parenting. My introduction to Gender Neutral Parenting was

through social media posts and articles discussing increasing use of gender neutral language employed by parents and nonbinary gender identities. My initial impression was that this was a niche celebrity movement, but upon further investigation I found whole online communities dedicated to this novel parenting method. These parenting groups focused on supporting and guiding one another as they learn to parent their children outside of the gender binary. These groups are integral in understanding how Gender Neutral Parenting functions within a culture that understands and builds its world around a binary gender system.

Facebook pages and parenting blogs became the primary sources of information as I tried to understand what Gender Neutral Parenting is, at least within the United States, and what motivated these parents to raise their children outside of the gender binary that so much of our social and cultural realities are built to maintain. Even in turning to online sources, the Gender Neutral Parenting community turned out to be very small. The largest public social media group on Facebook has approximately 11,000 followers and the other private groups have only 4,000 members between the two of them. The earliest, and only public pages of these groups was created on January 12, 2012. The newer, private groups were created in 2015 and 2017 with very strict rules against Hate Speech, bullying, and harassment. I include these groups because they are the ones currently active and they demonstrate the necessity for boundaries put in place to protect Gender Neutral Parents from negativity and judgment.

Going into my research, balancing my research questions with ethical concerns over the privacy of parents proved critical. Many groups did not allow my access into private forums that must remain a safe and supportive space. The public, active Facebook group helped me construct some ideas shared by the group, but it left some ambiguity concerning the actual practice of raising



a child gender neutral. I was able to meet and interview two parents from these private groups which provided added nuance on daily life to the guidance found in social media posts.

To protect the parents and groups, each parent I interviewed signed a consent form and is referred to under a pseudonym to further safeguard them from negative reactions to their parenting choices. These negative reactions can range from the belief these parents are intentionally confusing their children to even more harmful claims of child abuse. In one case, a mother in Des Moines, Iowa was accused of abusing her child by using gender neutral parenting techniques resulting in mental harm to her child (Rood:2017). If such claims of abuse are upheld, their child may be removed from their care for an indeterminate amount of time and a discouraging precedent may be set. To respect the groups privacy while further supplementing my social media research, I have turned to parenting blogs as they often offer more in depth “how-to” guides on Gender Neutral Parenting. These authors have all been parents themselves and are sharing their reasons for and experiences with raising their children outside of the binary. The content of the blogs helps to explain certain trends found within the social media communities to construct the clearest picture of Gender Neutral Parenting to outsiders such as myself. As insightful as these blogs are, they offer another filtered version of real life, their advice often missing the complexities of their day-to-day complications and challenges that go on behind a computer screen.

The digital space that allowed group members and me the ability to transcend our physical circumstances to connect presents its own set of limitations. The social media communities presented the community as a utopic social media space in which gender could be addressed universally by all parents. The general message being that if all members enact similar gender-neutral methods, then a world in which their kids are free from gender oppression may be realized. Utopias envision a perfect world, one disconnected from our current reality that can be made real

through “the commitment of ordinary mortals” (Moore 14:1990). Most parent’s that post or blog do not disclose their background and, those that do, are so few that they could not be used to discuss impacts such as race, class, age, and other categories on parents and their ability to raise their children gender neutral. All members isolate the issue of gender, which can be uniting and provide the naive and optimistic quality of creating a future consistent with a utopia

. Yet, parents do not often discuss or address the issues of race, class, and other social categories that are also sources of inequality that interact with gender. If this group does not deal with the intersections of other systems of oppression, then gender can never truly become neutral. For example, a Black man, woman, or nonbinary individual will continue to be valued differently from their white counterparts negating actual neutrality. If this social media utopia does not address the intersections of gender and other sociocultural categories, then it may be doomed to repeat the same mistakes as “white feminism” in which white women committed “discursive violence” by erasing the issues of women of color. This violence within the feminist movement fed into issues like white supremacy and classism, which Gender Neutral Parenting is at risk of committing should it isolate their goals to gender alone (Moon 2020). And so, with my own methods I struggled to figure out a way I could both understand and agree with the gender neutral parents, but also push back against the idea of gender as neutral.

Before gaining access to these groups my project required International Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure my study was ethical. My IRB protocol outlined my intention to primarily extract data from public social media forums and parenting blogs while also engaging with private groups to find parents to share their experiences. During this process I experienced the most push back surrounding my ability to guarantee confidentiality, but once confidentiality was aligned with University Policy, I began communicating with private Facebook groups. These groups had strict

“No Journalists or Students” policy for the membership guidelines, so my correspondence with parents in these groups were made via the group administrators. These administrators messaged me via Facebook messenger asking to write a post that they would approve and share with their community on my behalf. The post introduced myself and outlined that I was looking for parents to interview for my thesis project regarding Gender Neutral Parenting. From there, using the contact information I provided, I had four parents reach out to participate. Of these four, two would follow through with an interview and share their experiences. These two parents would be significant in explaining certain complexities within Gender Neutral Parenting that blogs and public social media outlets were unable to convey. That being said, both parents were white, heterosexual married couples from the United States. While they both came from two parts of the U.S. with drastically different political and personal attitudes surrounding gender, they ultimately provide a very specific, and situated experience of the movement given their similar sociocultural status in American culture.

These interviews had three general lines of questions for these parents. The first set was concerned with these parent’s background concerning the gender binary. I asked questions about how they were raised regarding gender and then asked the impacts, if any, on their method of parenting. The next set of questions had to do with the “why” and “how” of Gender Neutral Parenting. It asked what their reasons and motivations for turning to Gender Neutral Parenting were and how they applied these parenting methods. The final series of questions asked them about the significance of media, including questions about the role of social media and popular media representation of gender.

Aside from the limitations of my study population and access, the scope of the research should also be made clear. This study focuses on the parents and their actions and beliefs rather

than a study of children directly. Second, this study is catered to early childhood parenting. Parents offer the most abundant and significant advice and guidance to younger children unable to form their own gender identity. Once older children express their gender the main guidance suggested in the platforms I studied is to respect and support their child's gender identity. Certain impacts, like puberty, and their associated challenges on both the parent and child are not discussed to the extent that I can analyze. It would be inaccurate to draw actual behavioral or psychological data from the children themselves until they are old enough to fully explain their actual perceptions of their gendered selves.

The sources I utilized for this research firmly place the Gender Neutral Parenting movement in an American context which narrows the impacts of this research to the specific gender/sex system within the United States. American culture is often described as a culture of individualism, freedom, and equality, which would make it seem the perfect setting for a gender revolution. While some progress has certainly been made in parts of the U.S. allowing for queer identities and sexualities to be formally acknowledged and protected, the gender sex order remains largely a heterosexual and binary gender order. And despite the American claims of freedom and equality, stipulations of conformity suggesting this freedom is conditional (Spindler & Spindler:1983). This conditional freedom is evident when considering the recent Supreme Court's decision to overrule *Roe v. Wade* in June of 2022 (410 U.S. 113:1973) which protects an individual's rights to have or seek an abortion, showing that people with female sexed bodies are not being allowed the freedom of bodily autonomy. Conversely, no comparable laws on male sexed bodies are in existence, further contradicting American claims of equality.

However, within this sociopolitical formation, changes to the gender order are not precluded. In the early 90s, the U.S. saw the formation and increased use of the category of

“transgender”. The term itself was used to differentiate a non-normative gender identity from sexualities because, though related, the general U.S. perspective views them as separate and distinct categories of identity. It was used as an “umbrella term” for individuals who engage “with various forms and degrees of cross gender practices and identifications” (Valentine 37:2007). The term allowed the formation of a community identity in which political action can be taken on for better or worse. While this term became powerful in allowing transgender identifying individuals a voice in the larger political discourse, its function as an “umbrella” became problematic. David Valentine (2007) found that the use of the transgender category threatened many “transgender” individuals’ ability to claim status as either “man” or “woman” by including a multitude of other gender-variants. Alternatively, for those with more “radical” understandings of gender, like those that identify as gender fluid or androgynous, the inclusion into the transgender community aligned them too firmly into a category. So, while there is power in creating a category to allow for activism and representation in the larger political discourse, a category can also become a site of erasure for many that are encompassed by its broadness. This tension indicates a need for further renegotiation of the terms of gender in which power and meaning are rendered neutral and individuals can express any variation of gender without consequence.

### **Section 3: Defining Gender**

Gender Neutral Parents aim to disrupt the binary by creating a new cultural logic to socialize their children. This logic removes the values placed on genders and disconnects them from sex by rejecting the limitations of the gender binary. The product of traditional gender binary parenting has led to stereotypes, inequalities, and invalidation of other gendered realities resulting in limitations and harms continually passed on to generation after generation. Gender Neutral Parenting seeks to create a “genderfull world” in which a multitude of gender identities becomes

valid and true gender equality becomes possible (Myers 2020). Even if these parents represent a small population, their existence disrupts the gender order and paves a way for a generation capable of imagining and enacting a gender revolution. It may even be the domino that brings down the entire structure. Before exploring the ways Gender Neutral Parents create this new logic and its potential impacts, gender neutrality needs to be explored. If a world without gender oppression is possible, what could it look like?

### **Gender is not Biology**

Before discussing the possibilities of changing the “rules” of gender, we must establish what “gender” is, at least within the modern Western context. Gender, first and foremost, is a culturally constructed interpretation of sex (Butler, 1990:8). Sex is the anatomical difference of the body, including genitals, hormones, and chromosomes, that places one in the category of either ‘male’ or ‘female’. Much of mainstream Western ideology relies on sexual differences to justify the resulting binary gender structure. In trying to understand why this universal exists, Sherry Ortner (1974) argues that all gender systems are supported by the universal ideology that women are symbolically closer to “nature” than “culture” A woman’s proximity to “nature” is caused by her physiology which allows her to procreate and lactate associating her more with the production of our species. Men’s physiology on the other hand has separated him from this function, allowing him to distance himself from nature and become the primary cultural creator. Though this proximity to nature or culture is itself a cultural construct, the logic can explain why gender power structure universally subordinate women as part of a larger social practice that creates gendered bodies – “feminine women and masculine men ” (Butler 2004:55; Franke 1997; Ortner:1974). Masculinity being the “superior” qualities found in males that places men as the higher valued sex and femininity being its lesser complement. To maintain the status quo of

gender inequality, mainstream Western culture often claims, though rarely backed up by data, the idea that gender differences are biological and therefore “natural” and “immutable.” Scientific studies on the biological differences between the sexes have been unconvincing despite their mainstream acceptance. Even if there were convincing evidence of biological gender, it cannot explain all of the functions of gender. Gender scholar Judith Lorber (2022:62) succinctly rejects claims of biological differences between the sexes in her work in *The New Gender Paradox*:

I can't think of anything positive to say about the belief that brains can be codified as male and female and the conviction that from infancy they produce gendered behavior. Copious research indicates that human brains are not gendered. Further, brain structure and organization do not alone produce behavior, nor do genes or chromosomes or hormones. Human behavior is a composite of physical, environmental, and social influences (Lorber 2022:62)

Even if brains were found to be biologically different enough to explain a woman's tendency to be feminine, which is often thought to be more compassionate, nurturing, and emotionally expressive than males, it is culture that places values on these behaviors. These feminine behaviors are perceived as inferior to masculine behaviors because cultural rules of gender are pervasive and socialized, or taught, from birth. Biology does not inscribe these valuations as these judgements are reliant on cultural systems creating often contradictory gender norms when looking at cultures across the entire world. Culture, not biology, is responsible for this perpetuation of power differentials.

Regardless, biology cannot account for the rise of nonbinary gender categories since there should only be masculine men and feminine women with the appropriate biological sex to match. Unless biology can somehow both expand to encompass all gender differences, while

somehow maintaining distinct categories, a biological framework cannot explain and support an “essential” quality of gender.

### **“Doing” Gender and Gender as Performance**

If gender is not of biological origin, then what is gender and where does it come from? How are these systems produced? West and Zimmerman (1987:129) introduce gender as the product of a social “doing” rather than “a set of traits, not a variable, nor a role.” Gender is a cultural construction created and “done” by humans which uses social and cultural forces to maintain its legitimacy. How one does gender relies on social and cultural determinations of gender-appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for each sex category, either male or female. The compulsion to continually do gender “appropriately”, and therefore reinforce the binary gender structure, is due to peers’ constant gender assessment and paired with the ever-looming threat of social consequences for failing to do gender correctly.

Butler’s (1990) theory offers an even more complex, if not controversial, conceptualization of gender as performance. In other words, no aspect of gender is “natural,” rather it is the continued citation and performance of previous gendered acts. To Butler, gender “is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler 1990:278). Citing Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Butler writes “one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one.” Having two x chromosomes or a vagina does not make one a woman, she is socialized and enculturated to become one. Butler (1990) argues that a woman, and by extension a man, are culturally created through repetition of performative actions. Her “concept of performativity encompasses the unconscious process of making gendered selves that reiterate social norms of femininity and masculinity and inscribe femaleness and maleness on the body” (Lorber, 2022:12). In doing so she further removes gender, and even sex, as something as “essential” to humans and challenges



gender's claims to legitimacy given it gender is just a reiteration of past gender performances. The past iterations are reflected in meaning placed on gendered clothing, hair styles, mannerisms, and even built into the language constructing gendered realities. Gender then becomes a performative feedback loop which reifies itself while also hiding its genesis which allows it to appear "natural" and legitimate. Butler importantly contends that, while humans perform gender unconsciously, they are just as capable of consciously creating a differently gendered self as non-binary people do. The theory of "doing" and "performing" gender opens the possibility for the complete dismantling of the gender binary and total reimagination of gender using subversion of gender norms.

One potential way to subvert the current hegemonic gender order and re-do gender performance is through "gender maneuvering", a way to do gender differently by altering who can embody gender specific performance. R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) introduce the idea of multiple masculinities, including hegemonic masculinity, which further explains the gender power structure and its continued existence. Hegemonic masculinity is differentiated from other masculinities in that "only a minority of men enact it" and "it requires other men to position themselves in relation to it" as well as "legitimized the global subordination of women" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Mimi Schippers (2007) adds to Connell's theory, claiming that masculinity is engaged and created by the two genders pointing out the dialogical relationship hegemonic masculinity has with both emphasized femininity and complicit masculinity. Emphasized femininity is defined as being "focused on compliance to the patriarchy" and complicit masculinity serves as "the inferior 'Other'" (Schippers 2007:87). Since these categories are made central in the gender order while other forms are marginalized, these behaviors are thought of as relational. These categories sustain the current gender order, but

Schippers suggests that “gender maneuvering” can disrupt and change gender relationships. Hegemonic masculinity, along with other masculinities and femininities, are unstable social categories. Since hegemonic masculinity needs to be flexible to fit a variety of different environments and situations which means, as Connell suggests, that it can be reformulated to allow for gender equality.

Gender maneuvering “is a collective effort to negotiate actively the meaning and rules of gender to redefine the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity in the normative structure of a specific context” (Finley 2010:39; Schippers 2002). Schippers (2002) looks at the alternative hard rock subculture as a stage for gender maneuvering where men and women negotiate a more equal gender relationship. Within this rock subculture women are encouraged to embody qualities typically categorized as masculine like being more outspoken, independent, and aggressive. Men’s embodiment of masculinity is also altered in that they are less aggressive and violent, thus allowing for women to participate in the subculture without fearing for their safety. Assessed together, the hard rock subculture creates a space where both the genders expand the possibilities of gender performance and promote more egalitarian gender formations.

While the gender maneuvering within subcultures is presented as a challenge to the mainstream iterations, Schippers (2002) acknowledges the limits to gender maneuvering as it is context specific and may not have much large-scale impact. Gender maneuvering focuses on the individual and face-to-face interactions given a specific environment having negligible impact on the larger gender structure that dominates much of the population and their surrounding institutions. It also still privileges masculine behaviors as women are encouraged to embody them to be considered equal while there is little to no emphasis for men to embody feminine

behaviors sustaining the value of masculinity over femininity. That is not to say that gender maneuvering is not successful in challenging the hegemonic gender binary, but it does fail to address the universal cultural logic that subordinate the categories of “woman” and “femininity” that society has built itself around.

### **Gender as a Social Structure**

Butler significantly brings the cycle of gender performance into view, allowing gender performers to be made aware of the possibility of altering gender, but this change is not so easily achieved. For Butler, there are regulatory forces of gender continually forcing the reproduction of gender norms. Gender norms are those established by the repeated citations of past gender performance that are then *normalized*. The norm is then enforced by regulatory forces that, any attempts to veer from, threaten the “cultural intelligibility for any person” (Butler 2004:52). For Butler (2004:55) regulation is both “that which *makes regular*” and a “mode of *discipline and surveillance*.” To perform gender in a manner that challenges the norm runs the risk of social punishments “including the surgical correction of intersexed persons, the medical and psychiatric pathologizing and criminalization of ... “gender dysphoric” people, the harassment of gender-troubled persons on the streets or in the workplace, employment discrimination, and violence” (Butler, 2004:55). It is not simple, or even safe, to openly adopt a non-normative gender performance so long as these regulatory forces determine the “parameters of personhood” (Butler 2004:56) So, while both “doing” and “performing” gender defines gender as fluid and mutable through changes in gender performance, regulating forces try to ensure this is not possible. These regulations Butler describes are part of the much larger gender social structure that supports the gender binary at both the interpersonal and institutional levels of society. This gender structure functions to “constitute and organize a major part of social order” which “is structured for

stability” (Giddens 1984; Lorber 2022:12). The stabilizing function of institutions can explain why, despite the lack of uniformity when it comes to gender performance and identity in contemporary society, gender remains a fixed, binary system. While gender is certainly a constant performance or doing, “its enactment is hemmed in by the general rules of social life, cultural expectations, workplace norms, and laws” (Lorber 2000:82).

Changes to gender performances will be integral actions necessary to end the current iteration of gender, but they fail to address the underlying structure built to allow for gender’s persistence. Barbara J. Risman (2018) offers a more comprehensive theory of gender as a social structure that “occur(s) at the individual, interactional, and macro levels” and acknowledges “that each level of analysis is equally important.” Change in any of these parts of the gender social structure has the potential to “set off a chain reaction” that begins to fragment the gender binary, calling for continued gender resistance in all forms (29). Risman is critical of both the “doing” and “performing” of gender as they are too vague as to what exactly counts as “doing gender”. With the increase in different types of masculinities and femininities, when does it count as “doing gender” and when is it considered subversive or “undoing gender?” Risman concludes:

After all, if anything people with female identities do is called femininity and anything people with male identities do is masculinity, then “doing gender” become tautological (Risman 2018:22).

Her perspective seeks to remove some of the ambiguity that surrounds both theories of “doing” and “performing” gender as well as build upon narrow ideas of structural theories often applied to gender. Risman (2018:30) rejects “generic structural theories applied to gender” because they “presume that if women and men were to experience identical material conditions...gender differences would disappear.” This ignores gender as an interactional and internal phenomenon

as it downplays how gender structure is “deeply embedded in society, within individuals, in every normative expectation of others.” Creating gender equal conditions does not address the ways in which gender has been built into society and human behavior enabling it to operate even if we remove explicitly gendered conditions. For example, the extension of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal protection clause, which should provide equal protection against gender-based discrimination, was determined to extend to women in 1971, *Reed v. Reed* case (404 U.S. 71). Despite this law, gender-based discrimination persists. In a 2017 study conducted by the Pew Research Center “about four-in-ten women (43%) say they have experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because of their gender.” Legally, men and women should have virtual equality, but the law has yet to address the differing statuses of males and females and how those pervades every interaction they have with individuals and social institutions created to uphold the gender binary.

Instead, Risman argued for an integrative perspective that calls for reflexivity of structures as human creations that go on to become structures responsible for social control. She cites Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory that “social structures not only act on people; people also act on social structures” (Risman 2018:31). So, while society is constituted by institutions and laws, we must abide by humans are ultimately complicit in their production and its perpetual citation. This theory removes the blame from the abstract social structures and replaces it in the constituent’s that are involved in its stability. Risman adds clarity to Butler’s (2004) idea of the regulation of gender that goes beyond interpersonally enforced performance and includes the gender structures as complicit in the continued perpetuation of gender norms by creating a complex cycle of reification.

Thus, gender on the personal, interactional, and institutional level, is the product of human action. These levels must be addressed if we hope to deconstruct the current gender order. From microlevel interactions between people as well as the macrolevel formation of gendered institutions including workplaces, government agencies, and lawmaking institutions. These institutions go on to be powerful constraints to their human creators, but, like all aspects of gender and culture, it is not immutable.

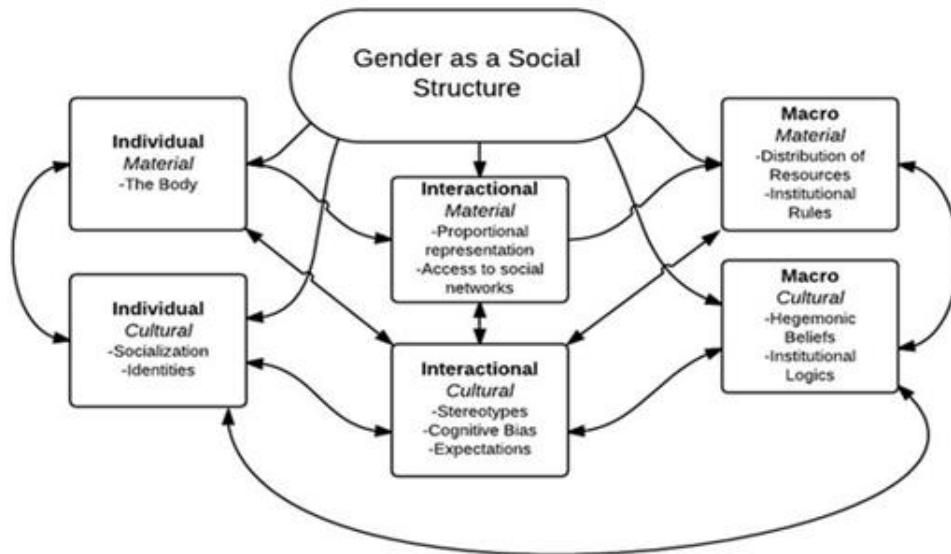


Figure 2: Risman, B.J. (2018) "Gender as a Social Structure."

As Risman demonstrates, pulling at one "string" of gender social structure, like acts of gender maneuvering or feminist political action typically do, will not topple the whole system as it has built in layers to sustain the gender order. Just as gender maneuvering is criticized as ineffective outside of the small scales of subcultural spaces and communities, institutional changes, like legislating for equal protections, are ineffective if the cultural perception of the people does not change.

### Gender and Kinship

To understand Gender Neutral Parent's part in challenging the gender structure, we must look at the ways they renegotiate kinship. Kinship is generally thought of as system that determines one's relatedness to others through biological and socially constructed connections. Kinship systems are diverse in their substance, but many share an "essence" of "the exchange of women between men" (Levi-Strauss, Rubin:1975). This "essence" is made possible by the universal subordination of women as a result of her sex. Kinship systems rely on male kin having claim over their female kin that is not reciprocated, generating sexual differences that produce the genders. Using commodified women, kinship works within political economy to gain kin relationships that can later translate to status, alliances, and wealth. In a modern neoliberal context, this set of relationships often looks like a heteronormative family the unequal division of labor. The woman provides free, undervalued work in the domestic sphere allowing men to gain wealth, status, and continue their symbolic role as the ultimate cultural creators. Kinship reifies the "universal logic" of men's superiority by producing the conditions that the ideology describes (Ortner 1974.) This system is then supported by social and political policies encouraging the "traditional" family. These range from workplaces only offering only maternity leave to restricted access to abortions to remove a woman's control over her reproduction and body (Elomäki, Kantola:2018). Kinship, now inseparable from gender, effectively translates the gendered "cultural logic" into the stability of the gendered political economy. The family then becomes a significant cycle within the gender binary as socialization transforms children into "cultured" humans. The family where children will learn the meaning of sex and begin the process of being gendered and their expected role within the political economy.

Today, families have taken on more diverse formations as LGBTQ+ parent and technological innovations redefining what it means. Families can now have same-sex parents,

child are born through artificial insemination, adoption, or surrogacy, and, in instances of rejection or loss of genetically linked family is absent, socially agreed upon families can take their place (Carsten:2004). LGBTQ+, and later Gender Neutral Parenting, are still harshly criticized for confusing their children or attempting to intentionally raise them to be queer. Regardless, Families no longer need to be heteronormative, and women have effectively “mastered” culture with technological innovations. The differences between the sexes within the family are no longer a pre-condition for its formation or success within the larger economy, yet the family remains a significant site for production of the gender binary.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in gender research which revealed the persistence of the gender binary and the patriarchy’s continued domination within the family despite the “formal equality” discussed previously. Recent studies found that women in heterosexual couples still took on a greater portion of the domestic work and had to cut back on more outside work than their male counterparts (Miller 2020; Collins et. al 2021; Lorber 2022). In another study, it was found that “1,060 US heterosexual couples on their early COVID-19 experiences found an increase in sharing housework from 26 percent to 41 percent.” (Carlson, Petts, and Pepin 2020; Lorber 2022:47). While the gender binary’s continued domination can certainly be explained by the institutional levels of the gender social structure, a significant site of gendering still happens in socializing a child. Socialization takes children from “mere organisms into cultured humans, teaching them manners and the proper ways to behave in order to become full-fledged members of the culture” (Ortner 80: 1974). This socialization continues to contribute to subordinating women and erasing non-binary identities through the exploitation of sexual differences.

#### **Section 4: Theorizing Gender Neutrality**



Looking at these current gender circumstances of gender in the U.S. it would be unsurprising to find movements still seeking gender equality rather than doing away with the whole concept of binary gender altogether. Getting rid of gender in its current formation would result in the loss of a category in which people can continue to fight for true equality. There is also likely a general inability to comprehend a genderless world because it is a universal social category that spans across all societies and cultures in some form or another. While gender equality will be a necessary step toward gender neutrality, they are not interchangeable terms. Gender neutrality would be the complete disregard of gender or expansion of gender categories allowing everyone the freedom to construct individual, unique gender identities without the fear of repercussions or unequal valuations. While we have already seen the expansion of gender categories in the creation of the category of “transgender” in the 90’s, the tension caused by using this umbrella term revealed that gender is far more personal than a few categories are able to account for. There is power in the category in which activists can act upon, yet these categories remain persistently unequal within the current gender system. In a gender neutral world, rather than being limited to the options of ‘man,’ ‘woman’, or ‘nonbinary,’ everyone would simply be a human capable of anything previously inaccessible to them by the strict gender binary.

So, can we undo gender and create a gender neutral world? In short, yes. Gender, like all cultural creations, is in fact mutable. While Risman (2018) demonstrates that gender as a social structure is complicated and requires continued challenges at both the interpersonal and institutional levels, it was made by humans. This means that humans are just as capable of unmaking or revising it. Since gender is a universal category, we must rely on theory when trying to imagine a world without gender, otherwise known as gender neutrality. With gender neutrality gender as a social category would cease to exist or become so numerous the valuation

of a single category would be challenging, if not impossible. There would no longer be a binary system in which the categories of “man” and “woman” in which culture and society can act upon. Sex would no longer determine one’s identity any more than other physical features like height or hair color. But what would gender neutral world, either genderless or genderfull, look like? Stefan Hirschauer and Judith Butler offer two methods for ending gender and creating a gender neutral reality.

Stefan Hirschauer’s unitary theory of undoing gender relies on simply not acknowledging gender at all. Hirschauer believes gender can be undone by simply not referring to the gender binary or ignoring it altogether. For him, though, not doing gender means not doing it in accordance with one’s sex category (Hirschauer 1994, 2001; Kelan 2010). Hirschauer is a German scholar not often translated in English, but sociologist Elisabeth Kelan (2010) provides an example of gender neutral workers in the workplace to demonstrate and clarify his theory. She found that, in instances where gender does not matter, like that of a worker, they thought of themselves as a gender neutral worker rather than a woman or female worker. As a worker, their roles are no longer separated along gendered lines. Men, women, and even nonbinary workers are expected to do similar jobs and statuses in the workplace. In this instance, gender is undone in this context because it becomes irrelevant to this person’s identity. The worker only re-engages gender when there is an interaction or reaction in which their response is gendered like a female worker responding to sexual harassment. She, in this instance, is no longer neutral and re-engages her gender (Kelan 2010). Given this logic, Hirschauer claims undoing gender or gender neutrality can occur if we do not engage with the gender binary, it no longer becomes a part of our identity and the doing or performing of gender stops occurring because it is ‘forgotten.’

On top of this, part of Hirschauer's (1994) theory presents gender maneuvering as gender neutral behavior which is a bit contradictory. He offers females in leadership roles as an example of not doing gender because they are not doing femininity, but she is actively engaging in gender as she takes on a masculine role. She would likely not be ignoring binary expectations or attempting to subvert them, yet in occupying a masculine role she may in fact be further reinforcing the valuation of masculine behaviors over feminine ones. In this example, gender is not neutral, it is actively being maneuvered and simultaneously reproducing the higher valuation of masculinity

The issue with his theory is that even when gender is not engaged in certain situations, it does not mean it has stopped operating. Subconsciously, gender can still be at play whether an individual feels they are being regarded as gender neutral. Risman's (2018:22-23) gender-framing perspective asserts "that gender exists as a background identity that we use cognitively to enforce interaction expectations of one another." Further, she claims "such expectations create gendered behavior even in settings that are novel and might be expected to allow more freedom from gender." For example, in 2020, women earned 84% of what men earned, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of median hourly earnings of both full- and part-time workers." Even if these workers do the same job, the male worker is literally valued and subsequently paid more making all their interactions already not neutral. So, while a worker may think they are gender neutral, a gender-frame is still being enacted to enforce gendered behavior and perceptions.

Beyond critiques of this theory, it seems nearly impossible to ask individuals raised in a gendered world to simply ignore it. If gender is a frame in which we constantly analyze one another through and is even built into laws, policies, and social institutions, how can an

individual simply ignore gender? The theory more so feels like it is asking individuals to ignore a problem and hope it goes away. Doing so presents issues in that, ignoring the source of inequality and oppression, like gender, enables its persistence. It has similar issues to *color-blind racial ideology* (CBRI), which “embodies the view that the United States has moved beyond race and racism and that the color of someone’s skin does not matter in today’s society” (Neville, Gallardo, and Sue 2016).

Race matters in terms of social indicators and peoples’ lived experiences. Thus, to deny race and ignore the existence of racism actually causes harm to people of color because it (a) falsely perpetuates the myth of equal access and opportunity, (b) blames people of color for their lot in life, and (c) allows White people to live their lives in ignorance, naiveté, and innocence (Neville, Gallardo, and Sue 2016).

Ignoring gender would mean ignoring the current inequalities and oppression already in place as a result of it. That’s not to say that one day a truly genderless world cannot exist, but first we must address gender inequity before a unitary gender neutral model is adopted.

If we cannot simply ignore gender to create gender neutrality, another possibility uses gender as a tool to deconstruct itself. This theory comes from Judith Butler (2004) who acknowledges that being human means complying to restrictive social norms in order to be recognized as such within the social and cultural contexts. To not adhere to these norms is to be “unintelligible” to other humans that do adhere and uphold these norms. Gender is one such norm that provides intelligibility as a human and defection from this norm, or making oneself an “other,” often results in social or physical repercussions, like violence, to encourage compliance. Instead, Butler looks to work within gender to ultimately destroy it.

To “undo” gender, Butler champions the power of multiplicity, which is “the very condition for agency” (Butler 2004:194). Butler argues against unitary theories that claim there can be no agency without a unitary subject citing that there can be no transformation without “the play of multiplicity...that generates new possibilities of life” (Butler 2004:194). Using the logic of multiplicity, we can imagine the “pluralization of gender, where more positions become available within the matrix” which would dismantle the gender binary and allow for a form of gender neutrality where more gendered realities are recognized (Butler 2004; Kelan 186, 2010). The gender binary then loses the basis for which it legitimizes its source of power and gendered social transformation becomes possible. The matrix being referred to, in the case of this project, can also be thought of as a gender spectrum, visualized as a horizontal graph, and the “positions” are the increasing gender identity categories that are becoming available along the gender spectrum. Once you add sex and sexuality to the axis of this model it begins to look similar to a color spectrum where anyone can create their own unique “shade” to fit their gender identity.

The multiple theory both allows for the creation of new gendered realities while also allowing current genders to continue to exist. This theory does not make the world genderless and instead removes the values attached to certain gender categories. Gender then becomes neutral while avoiding the harm of declaring all gender realities as unreal. A superior gender or even sex would be hard to argue with the increase of new gendered realities that are independent of the body. Men could even have female-sexed bodies which would throw biological determinist into a frenzy as the most privileged category could no longer be gatekept by anatomy.

Gender neutrality in either form can exist, but it must be part of a process that begins within the gender binary. In the U.S. today, there has already been the creation gender-neutral

policies and innovations which have not been effective in producing gender equality in either the interpersonal or structural scales of social organization. Instead, there needs to be what Lorber calls “feminist de-gendering movement” in which non-gendering practices are adopted in both everyday life and in the organization of institutions (Lorber 2000). This means the categories of men and women need to actively engage in de-gendering activities that have already been divided by the binary.

This de-gendering does not come without its own issues. One of the major anxieties that comes with discussing gender neutrality, or de-gendering movements, is how it cannot reconcile itself with the universal subordination and, more specifically, the violence against women. If gender moves beyond categories of men and women, how can laws, policies, and programs be enacted in order to protect women from violence? The gender specific terminology used for social movement regarding this is “violence against women” and is used as a “frame.” A “frame” is a “‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals —’to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences in daily life and in society” (Goffman 1974, Goldschied 15:2014). These “frames” can inspire collective action and social change, so it is understandable that women would feel at-risk should it disappear. But the “frame” itself has limitations because women are not the only gender that experiences violence. Violence against LGBTQ+ individuals, some of which overlap with the category of woman, does not fit within the “frame” of “violence against women.” To rectify this limitation a more gender neutral shift to this “frame” has been in use that is more inclusive while still allow social action for all genders. This is the “gender-based violence frame” that is often used interchangeably with “violence against women” even in contemporary language. “Gender-based violence” may detach the meaning from women, but it “can convey the same symbolic meaning by drawing attention to the disproportionate impact

intimate partner and sexual violence has on women...without implicitly suggesting that only women” are impacted by violence. While this will not solve the issue of gender-based violence, it demonstrates the ability for us to continue to address gender specific issues within a gender neutral context (Goldschied 18: 2014).

## **Section 5: Gender Neutral Parenting:**

### **Social Media and Bloggers**

Gender Neutral Parent recognize their role and brief opportunity to create new gendered realities for their children. For clarity, when discussing **Gender Neutral Parenting**, I am also referring also to groups called **Gender Creative Parenting** and **Gender Affirming Parenting**, which overlap. These groups all seek to raise children with gender neutral values, but their approaches slightly differ. **Gender Neutral Parents** specially raise “**theybies**,” a term referring to babies that use gender neutral pronouns until they can decide their pronouns and gender identity in the future. **Gender Creative Parents** allow for the use of gendered pronouns, but still practice similar, if not the same, values as Gender Neutral Parents. I have not found a distinct difference between **Gender Affirming Parenting** and **Gender Neutral Parenting** aside from the name. Despite the differing names, all the groups are housed within the same social media groups and many parents refer to them as different versions of Gender Neutral Parenting. I opt for the use of Gender Neutral Parenting as members of Gender Creative, Gender Affirming, and other labels, as it is the more inclusive term.

The definition of Gender Neutral Parenting, while specifics may vary from family to family, allows for children to choose their own gender rather than being assigned and socialized as a boy/girl dependent on the sex at birth (Davies 2020). It is not, despite the name, a complete disregard of the gender binary. This parenting method more often closely aligns with Butler’s

theory of multiplicity, allowing for an expansion of gendered realities. Basically, the gender neutral approach relies on using gender neutral pronouns (they/them), access to all toys, clothes, and styles regardless of traditional gendering, and some, if legal, may change their child's birth certificate to 'X'.

Given the several interpretations of gender neutrality, it should be no surprise that parenting strategies also takes many forms. For example, some parents may completely hide the sex of their child from outsiders until their child chooses how they want to identify. In some looser interpretations of gender neutral parenting, this just means exposing "their child to toys, clothes, and activities that cross gender lines" while still working within the gender system in place usually by allowing for the use of gendering pronouns (Bracken 2020). The online space leaves room for trial and error that remains open and free of parent shaming of any one method. Private groups have strict rules against negative behaviors to ensure that their pages continue to be a source of support and guidance as they construct these novel methods of parenting together. Group members recognize that neither of these is an incorrect or wrong version of gender neutrality, just different attempts at trying to raise a child outside of the binary and decrease the differential valuation of gender categories.

The first and most central challenge of raising children outside of the gender binary is that these parents are products of the gender binary. How can they raise their children gender neutral if they have never experienced it for themselves? Since this is such a small community, social media groups and blogs prove to be invaluable as these parents admit they are still learning how to parent their children outside the binary. Some parents cite commitment to this method as simply wanting to raise "well rounded children," but many were personally hurt by being raised within the gender binary. Using blogs and social media support groups, these



parents connect and strategize the ways in which they can raise a generation with a novel gender ideology, one where gender is ceases to capitalize on difference and inequality.

Despite the diversity withing the online spaces, together, their intentions align in that they want to provide their children the freedom to be who they are outside of stringent gender norms. Using these resources, parents and curious individuals like myself can piece together some of the beliefs and motivations of Gender Neutral Parents as well as see how this community helps parents navigate instances of social rejection for both them and their children.

### **Revisiting Biology**

When looking at Gender Neutral Parenting, the emphasis is allowing for freedom in gender identity and expression, but parents start dismantling the binary myth at the biological level. They contend sex is based on chromosomes, hormones, and genitals, and should be thought of as distinctly separate from gender. On top of that, sex is not a binary either. When looking at hormones, estrogen and testosterone are present in every individual in varying amounts. If we look at physical appearances, genitals can take several forms or even be present simultaneously. That variety even has biologists redefining sex as a spectrum. When looking at the variables, even at the genetic level, that make up sex “there's much greater diversity within male or female, and there is certainly an area of overlap where some people can't easily define themselves within the binary structure” (Acherman, Ainsworth 2015).

Gender Neutral Parents believe all sexes, even trans people, are “biological, natural, and real”. Both the private and public Facebook groups make clear that trans-exclusionary radical feminist, or TERFS, a feminist movement that is known for being transphobic, are not welcome. These parents reject the widely accepted narrative surrounding the body embracing and teaching their children sex is a much more flexible and numerous than a binary. By re-signifying sex and

the body as a spectrum rather than two distinct groups, the basis for which so many use to argue to prove the legitimacy of the binary ceases to exist. Without biology backing it up, ideas of “essential” sex and gender differences within a binary formation become null and void. Parents pass on this discourse of sex and the body to these gender neutral children teaching them that sex cannot and should not be used to determine one’s gender identity. In doing so, children are being taught they have ultimate control of defining their own body. This also means that these parent’s do not encourage “corrective” surgery on intersexed bodies, since that too is a permanent, painful guess at their child’s gender identity. At the same time, they do not invalidate trans people taking action to alter their body to align with their chosen gender identity. While the consensus is that the body should not be used as the ultimate to determination of the gender of a child, there is also an emphasis on allowing their children the freedom to determine their own sex and gender. These parents believe their roles should be to introduce and teach their children about the diverse possibilities of sex and gender open to their kids, not deciding any part of it for them.

The intervention of these parents is revolutionary when considering the family was a major part of creating and reproducing the differences between the sexes. Parents would socialize their children resulting in the substance of the categories of “man,” “woman,” and, through exclusion, “non-binary.” By no longer conflating sex and gender, Gender Neutral family starts to disrupt the relationship between kinship and gender. If biological sex is rendered neutral, the female body can no longer be treated as subordinate within kinship. The female body is no closer to nature than the male body, the procreative functions of these bodies no longer get to dictate either sexes psyche or role in the larger social order. Within kinship and its relationship to the larger political economy, female bodies are no longer being socialized to continue their role as a form of currency instead rendering all bodies already fully humans and cultural producers.

And by not pathologizing intersexed individuals, then sex is no longer a binary either. In not using kinship to produce sexual differences, family organizations can become more equal at the least. The potential impact at the large scale could mean that without kinship systems producing those sexual differences, the gender/sex binary no longer becomes profitable or unequal in a neoliberal, capitalist economy. It may be what the U.S. needs to make their gender equal or neutral laws and policies effective. But this too may be too utopic as sex is not the only category that culture produces inequality. At the very least, this shift in the underlying cultural ideology of sex teaches a generation that the body tells us nothing about a person meaning they can no longer rely on sex to form assumptions and biases.

### **Neutralizing Language**

Moving beyond the sex and the body, gender neutral parents opt for gender neutral/inclusive language with their children. English, though certainly not the only one of its kind, is a gendered language full of biases that shape people's perception. By only having male or female pronouns implies the existence of only two sexes and genders. Beyond that, male and female words are often sexist with underlying meaning and biases that shape how one views someone or something as either masculine, feminine, or otherwise (Boroditsky et al. 2013). Lynn Lovedall (1955) conducted a lecture series demonstrating how the female equivalent of a word is more often placed subordinate to the males with a negative or lesser connotation attached. She used examples like "mister" and "madam" as two equivalent terms full of sexist biases. "Mister" connotes respect or nothing much at all, but "madam" is charged with sexually derogatory connotations. In another example brought up by parents within the Facebook group, referring to groups using gendered references like "ladies and gentlemen" or "guys and girls" excludes children that lie outside the binary.

Despite these linguistic biases, English also has the benefit of having few gender markers in practice. English is a *natural gender language* that primarily gender using pronouns, but typically do not gender nouns. While not a fully *genderless language*, it utilizes much less use of gender than *grammatical gender languages* that use gender to refer to all nouns as either masculine or feminine. In countries where *grammatical gender languages* are spoken, there is “less gender equality than countries that speak natural gender or genderless languages” (Prewitt-Freilino et. al.:2011). In another surprising finding, *genderless language* does not correlate with gender equality or neutrality. Within this language system, neutral terms are likely to be interpreted with a male-bias. *Natural gender languages* can promote gender symmetry by referencing women directly making the language more inclusive and less prone the defaulting to a male-bias (Prewitt-Freilino et. al.:2011). This means removing gender entirely from the English language may do more harm than good, leading to the increased perception of the masculine as default. The response has been to create more gender-fair languages which have taken two forms: "balancing/feminization" and 'neutralization.' (Gustafsson, Back, and Lindqvist 2015).

When the child is born, to remain gender neutral, Parents employ the use of the gender neutral pronouns (they/them) until the child can decide their pronouns. (They/them) pronouns offer a non-gendered option of reference which, as an already existing part of the English language, should reduce the confusion from others when it comes to interacting with a gender neutral child. This language is neutralizing while also being inclusive to those who may later decide to identify outside of the binary. Some parents also find that this significantly reduces the amount of gendered small talk people can engage their child with that could influence their gender identity and perceptions. One parent observed:

It's kind of nice people not knowing, because then they can't engage in the heteronormative small talk that comes along with gender - "oh, he is such a ladies' man" or "she will have SO many boyfriends" - you don't know their sexuality/gender unless they tell you. (C.D. 2022)

Beyond pronouns, parents use neutralizing language in references to others. Instead of saying fireman, a parent may say firefighter to remove the masculine biases. Gender Neutral Parents use this language method to avoid unintentionally gendering their child with stereotypes and biases wrapped up in language (Davies 2020).

Gender Neutral Parents certainly begin by using neutralizing language, at least until their child can determine their own pronouns, because there is little to no gender biases and expectations attached to them. At the same time, they use "balancing/feminization" to subvert gender stereotypes in instances when male-biases may be expected. The best example of this is using "she/her" for book characters that appear masculine to subvert gender stereotypes and roles. In the real-world interactions, neutral pronouns are often used only until an individual can clarify their gender pronouns. Significantly, their use of gendered pronouns does not stop at masculine, feminine, and neutral. Parents encourage their children to identify pronouns that they feel most fitting which may be completely novel and allow for inclusion of more gendered realities. This allows all nonbinary gender identities to speak themselves into existence using pronouns and words they find more fitting than the already existing gendered/genderless options. For parents, the idea is to create a more inclusive environment, but it may have further impact in the gendered order. Neutral and inclusive language allows for decreased gender bias and binary distinctions which linguists believe may be one of the steppingstones to gender equality (Liu et

al 2018). The idea holds that if you cannot separate people into distinct and gendered categories, it would be difficult to treat them differently (Lorber 2022:36).

### **De-Gendering Visual and Material Culture**

Moving on from language to more visible or material implementations of gender, Gender Neutral Parents do not believe clothing, hairstyles, and toys are inherently gendered and meaning is placed on them by the surrounding culture and society. Clothing, hairstyle, and other presentations are often used as gender displays in the absence of other biological indicators which allows for the continued use of gender biases and stereotypes. To subvert this, they provide their children with visual and material representations of gender across all gender lines and categories. Boys are often associated with blue, toy cars, shorts, and t-shirts, while girls are associated with pink, playhouses, tea sets, and skirts. The meaning associated with these becomes either masculine or feminine despite the reality that these objects are inherently neutral until acted upon by culture.

Letting children transgress the divide of visual and material is the source of some of the harshest pushback as these are visible indicators of rejection if the traditional cultural ideology of gender. Parents respond to criticism regarding the crossing of gender boundaries by asserting that “clothes and colors are for everyone” and “their body, their choice” to defend their choices, argue against gendering of visual and material culture.

This tactic appears superficial when altering the ideology of sex and gender differences, but things like toys and clothes have a significant role in socializing children:

The kinds of toys American children play with tend to adhere to a clear gender binary.

Toys marketed to boys tend to be more aggressive and involve action and excitement.

Girl toys, on the other hand, are usually pink and passive, emphasizing beauty and nurturing. (Maas, 2019)

By dividing toys along gender binary gender lines, consumer companies are continuing to socialize their children according to their anatomy with stereotypical values that uphold the current gender order. Gender Neutral Parents then are not only using material goods to socialize their children across gender boundaries, but they also refuse to engage in economic marketing strategy that allows the gender binary to remain profitable.

### **Re-doing Performance**

Changing the way children speak, the clothes they wear, and the toys they play with, parents are altering gender performance and perception. The gender performance these parents are nurturing is one without gender boundaries or inequalities. In that way, it may be a more impactful form of gender maneuvering because it not only expands the gender categories with which to maneuver while also having taken steps to completely alter the cultural ideology that upholds the system.

In Gender Neutral Parenting, sex is rendered neutral, and gender is a mystery. Their children are encouraged to adopt both masculine and feminine gender performances as they see fit until they find what they, not society and culture, feel is appropriate. A boy can wear a dress, a girl can be aggressive, and most revolutionary of all, a child can be nonbinary. The important part is that parents do not promote specific sexual differences and the resulting gender roles for some gain in gender and kinship systems. In removing the valuation of masculinity over femininity, children are encouraged to become a mixed bag of both behaviors making it difficult to distinctly choose one over the other. The impact of these new “neutral” performances on the

gender social structure creates a new dialogical relationship between people, not as actors in a gender hierarchy, but humans with a unique, equitable identities.

### **Navigating Pushback**

Gender Neutral Parenting is not isolated from the social rejections and regulations that have upheld the binary, but these parents are in a position where they can help protect their children from these negative consequences. In looking at publicly posted blogs surrounding the subject the comments from readers often seek to invalidate or ridicule parents.

 **Parents Member**

03/04/2019

This is so ridiculous and extremely concerning. Either you have two X chromosomes and you are a girl or you have an X and a Y chromosome and you are a boy. End of story. I can't even believe people are screwing up their kids and society as a whole by being so ignorant. I'm not saying a boy shouldn't be able to play with a doll and a girl can't play with a truck but you don't just let your child decide what gender they are. That was already decided at conception.

 [Reply](#)

*Figure 3: A public comment posted under Alana Bracken's public blog discussing GNP; <https://www.parents.com/parenting/should-you-raise-a-gender-neutral-baby/>*

As a result, a large part of the movement focuses on teaching parents how to set boundaries for themselves and their children. The goal is to limit others from forcibly gendering children based on traditional gender criteria. On top of this, parents must actively teach surrounding individuals how to appropriately interact with their children thus creating strict boundaries supporting their parenting choices and child's freedom to create their own gender identity. Some more



comprehensive support documents posted by group members supply scripts that mitigate negative reactions to their parenting choices:

As long as our child is happy, healthy, and meeting their developmental goals, we don't care what they wear, or which toys they play with.

If pushed further, parents encourage other parents to set firm boundaries:

This is not up for discussion. Thanks for respecting our parenting choices...

I recognize that this might seem unusual, but it is what we believe is best for our child.

We appreciate you respecting our parenting choices, even if they differ from yours.”(B.D. 2022)

If these do not work, parents have had to cut off family and friends that have refused to accept their parenting choices to circumvent the consequences of not conforming to traditional gender ideologies. In some cases, people can become more open-minded and accepting of the practice, but in other cases parents must remain ready to defend their choices (Davies 2020, Long 2020).

In holding these firm boundaries, parents are committing to protecting and accepting their children's freedom to create their own gender identity.

Whatever the reason may be, there is no feasible way for these children to entirely remove themselves outside of the gender binary, so some parents rely on educating their children on their views of sex and gender. Parents are transparent with their children, educating them on multiple sex and gender, gender neutral pronouns, and blurred gender boundaries can help parents teach them to be inclusive allowing them to process the gender binary using a gender neutral framework. One parent explained that their child's understanding of sex and gender is more nuanced, making them capable of seeing gender realities beyond the gender binary:

“We teach them to use gender-neutral words until a person tells us about themselves. We call kids *friends*. We have taught Zoomer about their own body without using boy-girl labels. Zoomer understands that some girls have penises, and some boys have vulvas, and some intersex kids have vulvas and testes. Zoomer knows some daddies get pregnant and some nonbinary parents are called Zazas... Zoomer has been raised with a focus on inclusivity, they have an instinct to make everyone feel welcome. When a character on a kids’ show says, “Hello, boys and girls!” Zoomer adds, “And nonbinary pals!”” (Myers 2020).

In this case, Zoomer being a bit older, demonstrates the potential success of raising their children outside the binary and giving them a framework to understand the actual complexities of gender. That does not mean children will not be taught about the gender and sex binary and potentially influenced by the binary since, if nothing else can be said about it, it is a resilient system. What it does give them is the knowledge to make their own choices surrounding their gender beliefs whether it comes from the surrounding two gender social structure or even from unintentional gender biases from their own parents. And that may be the entire point of Gender Neutral Parenting to begin with. Parents are allowing their children the freedom to form their own opinions about who they are and what they believe surrounding gender. This may mean their children adhere to the gender binary and it may not, but it supplies these children with the knowledge that biology and culture do not have to determine your gender identity. These parents are redefining the system of kinship and gender by providing their children as much agency possible in determining who they are and what they can become. This completely changes the role of the family in producing binary sex and gender, into one in which gender is a safe identity

to be explored. The only “normative” gender and sex is whatever their children decide it is and their parents will ensure they treat each of these identities as real and valid.

### **The Parents**

Most of the data for this thesis came from social media and blogs which did lack some of the nuances of the real-world application of these parenting methods. The result is a thesis in which Gender Neutral Parenting comes across utopic presenting itself universally applicable with little consideration of the intersections an individual’s unique circumstances. The impact of this group is further limited by its intense focus on the interaction, family levels of gender because it there is no group effort to engage in activism.

My interview with two parents, Lisa and Vanessa, from the private groups added the experience of real-life application that social media groups did not convey. These two parents identify as cis-gender, middle-class, white women in heterosexual partnerships and raised “gender traditional.” Additionally, they practice what they consider Gender Creative or Gender Inclusive Parenting which shares the same gender neutral ideology but does not use gender neutral pronouns for their child. They still represent a narrow perspective both in their sociocultural category and their specific strategies, but their experiences reveal the complexities of raising a gender neutral child. Most of these parents are unlearning their own gender biases. Lisa, Vanessa, and other members raised within the binary are their proof that adults are capable of learning and adopting gender neutrality, but there is no emphasis on educating others outside of their family. By not trying to impact gender beyond the family unit , just as these parents learned to be gender neutral their kids can learn and uphold the gender binary. In fact, their willingness to accept their child regardless of their gender identity may make conforming to the gender binary more appealing since the repercussions from mainstream society is often harsher.

Much of Lisa and Vanessa's strategies align with what is shared online. They use neutral/inclusive language, provide "all the options" of clothes and toys, and allow their children freedom to express any gender regardless of sex. After talking to them, some obvious issues with this movement became even more clear. One of the biggest critiques of online Gender Neutral Parenting communities is that it deals with gender in isolation. The implied message it sends is that anyone can raise their child gender neutrally with little to no regard of overlapping social categories. Vanessa and Lisa both demonstrate the need to adjust the movement in order to fit their lives. For Lisa, this means she has to use gendered pronouns and has to dress her children in gendered clothes in certain circumstances like when she visits her family. She attributes this to the conservative politics and beliefs of the Southern state she lives in. This leaves her in a political economy more hostile and isolating than other parents resulting in her needing to strategically employ her parenting to avoid being seen as non-normative and producing conflict.

For Vanessa, she also uses gendered pronouns, but this is a result of her partners parenting preferences more than the politics of her liberal state being hostile. Vanessa referenced a limitation on being able to provide clothes across gender lines because she gets free hand-me-downs which leaves her with more "boy" clothing. She is financially able to provide the "girl" options, which are notoriously more expensive, but this demonstrates a certain level of wealth to provide all the option.

Lisa and Vanessa further add that fact that this movement and community is primarily accessed online, a service that is not free, participation and accessibility is contingent on social, political, and economic circumstances. While Lisa and Vanessa are in a position to adjust their parenting to address their limitations, other marginalized groups may not be able to. Single or working parents may not be able to primarily socialize their children, others might not have

access to a safe environment to engage in the practice, and others may not even know it exists because they cannot afford access. None of these topics are brought up suggesting members are likely not discussing ways in which they can address these issues. This means the ways in which gender interacts with race, class, and sexuality to produce inequality may prevent true gender neutrality from being possible.

Vanessa even voices this limitation as one of her major fears:

“My fear as a parent, trying to parent gender neutrally, is that the years we put into is going to be undone so quickly when someone with more influence than us...says something, like, one time. We won’t have any control over it, we won’t be able to undo it, so I am super afraid of it” (12 April 2022).

For her, the only thing "real" thing preventing her fear from being realized is the gender neutral education she used to socialize her child. If this movement can aid in the creation of more social and political changes that support gender neutrality, then their cultural ideology may have more anchors in the larger gender structure to ground it.

Many of these critiques and even these parents’ anxieties are likely products of the novelty of Gender Neutral Parenting. Lisa and Vanessa found themselves struggling to imagine their future and the issues they will experience as their children get older because they have not come up yet. It is the newness of the group and lack of consensus that can either be its strength or weakness. Lisa described this groups as welcoming to new ideas and a diversity of tactics because all of the parents recognize they are learning. She has never felt parent shamed within these groups because members recognize that, in the absence of hard data, they are all just experimenting. As they grow, they may evolve to address some of the issues within the space by expanding discussion of intersectionality and organize related political action. At the same time,

if they cannot reach a consensus, their political action may be hampered by their lack of a unitary goal. Regardless, Lisa and Vanessa remain hopeful that their actions will result in the breakdown of the gender binary and a world where people are free to be whomever they were meant to be.

## **Section 6: Conclusion**

The gender binary is pervasive and continually resilient as it continues to survive various attempts at its destruction. Feminist and LGBTQ+ activists have and continue to fragment the binary, but it persists at all levels. “The gender binary is still built into most people’s personal identity and self-presentation, organizes interactions, and structures the major components of social order” (Lorber:2022). Recent studies have found that while progress toward gender equality has been made, it has been stalled within the last decade. And in large part, what I have found through my research is some of the reasons for this stall have to do with persistent effort to raise children with normative, binary gender expectations. Many families remain a foundational and complicit system of upholding the binary. As a parent, raising a child gender traditional is easier and safer because they already fit in the world, but the harm they inflict to their daughters and non-binary children, while delayed, should make them rethink their participation in producing the gender binary. Normative gender education perpetuates women’s subordination and the nonexistence of non-binary identities creating a lifelong cycle of gender inequality.

Gender Neutral Parents are unique in that they recognize their role within the family and use that to socialize their children outside of the gender binary. They teach their children to reject biology-as-destiny myth, use gender neutral/inclusive language, and de-gender the culture around their children. Their efforts are the closet we can ever get the “foundation” of the gender social structure meaning its disruption could be substantial. This generation of gender neutral kids have the potential to create a world most cannot even conceptualize, a truly gender neutral

world. Significantly, this does not mean the end of gender, and, in its current formation, “true” gender neutrality can be genderless or genderfull, where the binary can no longer inflict the same harm on their children that it has been causing since its genesis. The impact of this movement has yet to be seen since most of their children are still too young to fully describe them. So, for now, in place of their testimony, we can look at some gender neutral changes that the U.S. has already enacted. California signed the bill mandating retailers to have a gender neutral toy section, six-and-ten Americans have heard about gender neutral pronouns, and several states allow for the non-binary designation of ‘X’ on birth certificates, drivers licenses, and passports (A.B. 1084:2021;Geiger &Graf:2019; Us Birth Certificates: n.d.).Gender neutrality efforts have resulted in structural change in at least some parts of the U.S. which means the movement can and has moved beyond the family. Their numbers are small, isolated, and still working through the terms of gender neutrality themselves, but these parents have just started, and their strength is their willingness to learn and continue to educate and advocate for the children. Whether these parents raise a generation of gender revolutionaries or not, their efforts taken together can be the catalyst for the “robust social change” (Davies, 2020) needed to finally broaden the gender binary.

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## Appendix



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**To:** Toni N Martinez  
**From:** Douglas J Adams, Justin R Chimka, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review  
**Date:** 04/06/2022  
**Action:** **Expedited Approval**  
**Action Date:** 04/06/2022  
**Protocol #:** 2201382724  
**Study Title:** Gender Neutral Parenting  
**Expiration Date:** 02/14/2023  
**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Jonathan S Marion, Investigator