

Alexander Gunning, Audrey Lucas, Ellie Chai, Stephanie
Zhang

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The Social Construct of Gender

Introduction:

The social construct of gender is an essential and dynamic framework that organizes society. It is a comprehensive system of different roles, behaviors, and expectations, which are categorized into individual identities within a broader societal context. The significance of this social structure lies in its influence on shaping interactions. Gender provides a lens through which people interpret and understand their standing in society while interacting with others. By reinforcing norms and expectations of individuals, the construct of gender creates social order, but also simultaneously emphasizes inequalities. Studying gender as a societal framework allows for the understanding of the mechanisms and behaviors that create stereotypes and gender norms. Specifically through its manifestation in interpersonal interactions, gender reveals the everyday processes through which gender norms are retained. Interactions are the basis of how gender is performed and reinforced, so, they are a key focus in the internalization and production of gender expectations. By studying gender's dynamics, mundane behaviors can be attributed to the broader patterns of inequality. Our data relays different situations in which gender norms are emphasized in regular conversation and how they create power imbalances.

This paper focuses on two key aspects of the social construct of gender. First, how gender is created in everyday interactions, and second, how these interactions reinforce institutionalized inequalities. By drawing on research done by West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "Doing

Gender”, our analysis further explores how people are perceived as being a specific gender through their social interactions, rather than their biological sex. Additionally, our research will reflect Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin’s (1999) framework of gender systems reinforcing stereotypes and disparities. Through this lens, we understand gender as an active, dynamic process that is deeply embedded in the principles of social life.

Data & Methods:

We analyzed three sources to exemplify the social construct of gender. Each clip demonstrates how gender norms are viewed and stereotyped in everyday interactions. The first is from *Not For Lads*, a British film about a boy from a working class mining town, who wants to become a ballet dancer. Next, we analyzed and transcribed a clip featuring Jimmy Fallon and Ariana Grande from *The Tonight Show* on a segment called “Ew!”. The excerpt from the video focuses on how gender norms and expectations are humorously performed and captured in casual exchanges. Finally, we looked at a scene from the popular sitcom *Friends*, in which Ross and Rachel interview a potential nanny for their infant child. The interaction highlights societal gender norms surrounding caregiving and the stigma associated with breaking traditional gender norms. We believe these particular clips show how gender norms are categorized and acted out. All of these clips were transcribed using conversational analysis conventions, capturing verbal expressions (e.g., “Ballet”), pauses (.), and reactions (“EW!”). The transcripts ensure the comprehension of the different nuances throughout each interaction, this helps further enable a more accurate analysis of how gender norms are performed. By acknowledging the characters’ reactions to certain departures from gender norms, we can further understand how gender is “done” and interpreted in the view of established stereotypes.

Transcripts & Analysis:

Source 1:  Billy Elliot (2000) - Not For Lads Scene | Movieclips

1 Dad: (0.2) Ballet.

2 Billy: What's wrong with ballet?

3 Dad: What's wrong with ballet?

4 Billy: It's perfectly normal.

5 Dad: (.) Perfectly normal?

6 Nana: I used to go to ballet.

7 Billy: See?

8 Dad: (0.3) Aye, for your nana. For girls. No- not for lads, Billy. Lads do football or boxin' or

(0.5) wrestlin'. Not friggin' ballet!

9 Billy: (.) What lads do wrestlin'?

10 Dad: (sharply) Don't start, Billy!

11 Billy: (0.4) I don't see what's wrong with it.

12 Dad: You know perfectly well what's wrong with it.

13 Billy: No, I don't.

14 Dad: Yes, you bloody well do. Who do you think I am? (0.3) You know quite nicely!

15 Billy: What? (0.3) What are you trying to say, Dad?

16 Dad: (.) You're askin' for a hittin', son.

17 Billy: No, I'm not. Honest.

18 Dad: You are, Billy- Billy.

19 Billy: (firmly) It's not just poofs, Dad. Some ballet dancers are as fit as athletes. What about that Sleep? He was a ballet dancer.

20 Dad: (.) Wayne Sleep?

21 Billy: Aye.

22 Dad: (.) Listen, son, from now on you can forget about the f-ing ballet. You can forget about the f-ing boxing as well. I'm bustin' my back for those 50 pence and you're... no!

In this scene, Billy's dad is projecting the societal perception that boys should engage in physically aggressive or competitive sports like soccer or boxing, while activities like ballet, which emphasize grace and emotion, are often viewed as feminine. By questioning his dad, Billy questions the gender norms his father attempts to perpetuate. His dad's escalating anger shows that he perceives Billy's interest in ballet as a threat to Billy's masculinity, so he feels he must resort to physical intimidation to enforce these gender norms. Billy challenges the stereotype that ballet is an effeminate activity by arguing that dancers can be as fit as athletes. He suggests that strength and grace are not mutually exclusive, nor does either belong to any one gender.

Throughout the exchange, Dad's repeated phrases, emphatic language, and threats serve to reinforce traditional masculinity. His disbelief and sarcasm reveal an internalized association between ballet and femininity. In contrast, Billy's humor, logical arguments, and persistence challenge these norms, highlight the social construct of gender and its expectations. The tension in the interaction demonstrates how societal norms and gender roles are maintained and challenged in everyday interactions.

Lines 1-3: The conversation begins with Dad's single-word utterance, "Ballet," which is loaded with disbelief and judgment. The brevity and tone of this statement set the stage for a defensive exchange. By dismissing ballet, Dad asserts a rigid view of gender roles, aligning with the traditional construction of masculinity as physical and dominant. His tone reflects the societal expectation that boys should not pursue interests deemed feminine. Billy's immediate response,

“What’s wrong with ballet?”, challenges Dad’s implicit critique. Billy's question denotes curiosity and resistance. There is no pause between Dad's judgment and Billy's reaction; this means Billy expected the critique and was prepared to respond to it. The repetition from Dad of Billy’s question louder and with a rising intonation, emphasizes mockery and incredibility. Dad is mimicking Billy's words; he considers the question self-evident and quite out of place, appealing traditional gender norms.

Lines 4-5: Billy counters with a declarative statement, “It’s perfectly normal”, employing the use of "perfectly" as an intensifier in defense of ballet's legitimacy. His tone contrasts with Dad’s rising emotion, and underscores their ideological clash. Dad repeats "perfectly normal" with a questioning intonation that portrays disbelief and sarcasm. His repetition and questioning emphasize his refusal to consider ballet as a valid or appropriate interest for his son.

As the exchange proceeds, Dad's irritation mounts and his turns become lengthier and more insistent, for example, “You know perfectly well what's wrong with it”. The intensifiers such as “bloody well” and “perfectly” point to his anger. Billy's responses are less long, but not impotent. He continues to challenge Dad's authority. Interruptions like, “What lads do wrestlin'?” further breakdown stereotypes and weaken Dad's argument, by deescalating the interaction with humor. Billy further challenges traditional gender norms by reframing ballet as an athletic pursuit. His mention of Wayne Sleep helps account for the departure from the norm and highlights the physicality and discipline involved in ballet. This reframing destabilizes Dad’s notions of masculinity and prompts a physical threat: “You ask for the hittin’, son.” This line reveals the intersection of power and gender, as Dad resorts to physical dominance to reassert control over the situation and uphold his expectations of masculinity.

The conversation ultimately illustrates how gender norms are upheld through ridicule, resistance, and coercion, reflecting societal mechanisms that enforce conformity. Billy's defiance, however, highlights the potential for humor and reason to challenge these norms, which opens a space for reimagining gendered identities. This aligns with West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender," where behaviors and interactions reproduce or resist societal expectations. As well as Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin's (1999) exploration of how gender systems persist through interpersonal dynamics.

Source 2:  "Ew!" with Ariana Grande

1 Jim: hh Hey Alexa, what's up?

2 Alex: (.) Not much, I'm kinda bummed.

3 Jim: EW (.) how come?

4 Alex: Well (.) I posted a pic on Insta and it only got like (.) three likes. I'm literally dying.

5 Jim: (.) EW (0.2) that's like NOT A LOT A LIKES.

6 Alex: I know (.) and one of them was from my *daaad*.

7 Jim: EWWW (.) NOO. I know how to get some likes. Let's take a BEFFELFIE—(0.3) a best friend forever selfie—BEFFELFIE.

8 Alex: (0.5) EW.

9 Audience: huh huh huh huh huh huh.

The excerpt takes place in a casual, informal setting between two friends, Jimmy Fallon and Alexa (Ariana Grande) engaging in a comedic conversation. Their conversation reflects gender norms and stereotypes around social media validation and common female interactions. The interaction concludes with laughter, indicating that the audience viewed the interaction as entertaining. The exchange highlights the process of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) through humor and exaggerated speech to emphasize stereotypes. Both Jimmy and Alexa dwell on the stereotypical behaviors and languages associated with gendered identities. This reinforces the social construct of femininity and masculinity as defined by social norms.

Lines 1-2: The conversation begins with Jimmy asking Alexa what's wrong, initiating and showing a foundation or framework for emotional disclosure. Alexa's response in line 2, where she expressed feeling “bummed,” positions them in a gendered role of emotional vulnerability which is often associated with femininity.

Lines 3-5: Jimmy's exaggerated reaction, particularly his use of “EW” not only reinforces Alexa's distress but it also adopts a performative and dramatic response to something that does not yield it. This feminized tone aligns with West and Zimmerman's (1987) argument that gender is constructed and reinforced through interactional dynamics and not just by how you look. Jimmy's overreaction to a very insignificant social media issue is a stereotype that is often tied to the perceptions of young women.

Line 6: Alexa feeds off of Jimmy's exaggeration expressing another embarrassing fact about her dad liking the post which hints at the humor behind your parents still being open and involved in their lives, something many teenagers nowadays see as ‘embarrassing’ and takes value away from the image posted on social media.

Line 7: Jimmy's suggestion to take a "BEFFELFIE" introduces another performative and stereotypical gendered action. The term "best friend forever selfie," said with the utmost excitement also shows another stereotype of female friendships and social media practices. The repetition of "BEFFELFIE" underscores the constructive nature of the interaction and makes it more humorous and playful.

Lines 8-9: Alexa's response also mentions the phrase "EW," aligning with the ongoing humor present in the interaction. The laughter from the audience in line 9 shows that the exchange is seen as a satirical commentary on social media norms and gender stereotypes.

This interaction showcases how everyday conversations can function as sources to perform and replicate gender norms. Jimmy's exaggerated femininity and Alexa's emphasis on emotional distress over social media highlight these gender performances, showing that gender is not fixed but rather socially observed. The humor allows the characters to navigate the stereotypes without challenging them in a controversial way, but it also highlights the awareness of performative nature and what it means to behave in a stereotypical female manner. By framing the gendered behavior as a way to be humorous, the interaction draws attention to the societal mechanisms that normalize and keep these norms in play. This aligns with Rideway and Smith-Lovin (1999) showing how gender systems are upheld through society and personal interactions.

Source 3:  Friends: Male Nanny

1 Ross: (skeptical) So you- you're just like a... guy who's a nanny?

2 Sandy: I realize how it's... a bit unorthodox for some people, but I really believe (.) the most satisfying thing you can do with your life (.) is take care of a child.

3 Ross: (sarcastically) Okay.

4 Sandy: Like in my last job (.) I met Daniel when he was three weeks old. And I got to watch him grow into this awesome person (.) When I left (.) I said: I'll see you soon... And he said to me: (slight pause) Skdandy...

5 (Ross and Rachel look puzzled)

6 Sandy: That was his name for me (.) I'll see you every day (.) right in... (points at his heart but starts to cry before he can finish his sentence)

7 Rachel: (gently) Oh... (reaches out to comfort him)

8 (Ross rolls his eyes.)

9 Ross: Yeah, kids say all kinds of crap.

10 (Emma starts to cry from the other room.)

11 Rachel: Oh God (.) she mu- (.) she must need her diaper changed.

12 Sandy: Oh, oh, I- I can take care of her, if you want...

13 Rachel: Oh, that would be great!

14 (Sandy leaves for Emma's room.)

15 Sandy: Uh just so you know... these dinosaur toys (.) aren't really age appropriate...

16 Ross: They're mine...

17 Sandy: (.) Oh! (.) Also not age appropriate

18 Rachel: (excitedly, to Ross) I love him (.) I love him (.) I love him...

19 Ross: Oh, come on, Rach, he's a guy!

20 Rachel: So wh-? (cuts herself off) He's smart (.) he's qualified. Give me one good reason we shouldn't try him out.

21 Ross: (0.2) Because (.) it's weird!

22 Rachel: Why?

23 Ross: Wha.. uhh.. Nuuh

24 Rachel: Wo:::w! I never looked at it that way

25 Ross: Wha- what kind of job is that for a man? A nanny? I-It's like if a woman wanted to be...

26 Rachel: Yes?

27 Ross: King?

Extract three features a scene from the popular sitcom *Friends* in which Ross and Rachel interview a potential nanny for their infant child. Prior to this scene, Ross and Rachel interview several other candidates but fail to find a suitable fit. In this scene, the two interview Sandy, a male nanny. The interaction highlights societal gender norms surrounding caregiving and the stigma associated with breaching traditional gender norms. Ross exhibits discomfort and skepticism, having initially thought Sandy, a gender-neutral name, would be a female nanny.

In lines 1-2, we see Ross skeptically question Sandy's occupation as he struggles to understand the concept of a male being a nanny. Sandy acknowledges his breach of gender stereotypes, describing it to be “unorthodox for some people” before expressing his passion for child care. By doing this, Sandy is acknowledging the societal assumption that caregiving professions are generally perceived as feminine.

In lines 4-6, Sandy delivers a heartfelt monologue about his experience with a child he previously nannied. In this monologue, Sandy displays strong emotions as he becomes tearful over his love for the job. This exemplifies how society associates vulnerability and emotion with feminine characteristics.

In lines 7-9, Ross and Rachel reinforce societal gender norms through their responses to Sandy's monologue. Rachel attempts to comfort Sandy through physical touch while Ross rolls his eyes in a comedic manner, showing disregard and belittling the emotions displayed by Sandy. Ross interrupts Sandy's narrative with a dismissive comment, a commanding move that undermines Sandy's breach of traditional gender norms.

In line 23, Ross stumbles upon his words, unable to articulate his disapproval of Sandy. This moment represents a conversational breakdown, where Rachel disempowers Ross, and he is unable to articulate a response that justifies his beliefs. This moment forces Ross to rethink the implicit assumptions underlying his disapproval of Sandy.

In lines 25-27, Ross remarks that being a nanny is not an appropriate job for a man. The show presents this perspective humorously, using a simile that compares it to a woman becoming a king. This interaction highlights Ross's discomfort and disapproval of individuals deviating from socially assigned gender roles within occupations.

The interactions between Ross, Rachel, and Sandy showcase the challenges and stigma associated with breaching traditional gender norms. Through Ross's general discomfort and distaste, Sandy's emotional vulnerability, and Rachel's supportive demeanor, this scene illustrates the manner in which traditional gender norms are both reinforced and contested. This dialogue consistently challenges the fragile nature of these gender norms, revealing the implicit expectations society places on gender roles. This show humorously sheds light on the fragile gender structures within society.

Conclusion:

These interactions collectively reveal how gender norms and stereotypes are performed, reinforced, and sometimes challenged in everyday exchanges. Each demonstrates the social construct of gender as dynamic and performative. Drawing on West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender" and Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin's (1999) exploration of how gender systems persist, these examples illustrate the pervasive and often unconscious ways societal expectations shape behavior and maintain inequalities.

Across *Not For Lads*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Friends*, a common theme emerges: the tension between traditional gender norms and their subversion. Whether through Billy's challenge to his father's rigid notions of masculinity, Jimmy Fallon and Ariana Grande's satirical exaggerations of femininity, or Ross's discomfort with a male nanny, each interaction highlights how gender roles are socially constructed and maintained through interpersonal dynamics. In each clip, humor is used as a tool to soften the ridicule and resistance of the critiques that reinforce stereotypes. These examples underscore that gender is not static or inherent, but rather actively performed in daily interactions. Power dynamics, such as Dad's threats in *Not For Lads* or Ross's dismissal of Sandy's caregiving abilities, demonstrate how authority is used to uphold traditional norms. Simultaneously, moments of resistance like Billy's logical defense of ballet or Rachel's support of Sandy, show the potential for challenging these expectations within a framework that often defaults to conformity.

Ultimately, these interactions align with Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin's (1999) argument that gender systems are upheld through the repetition of societal expectations in everyday life. They also reflect West and Zimmerman's (1987) notion that "doing gender" is an ongoing process that is performed and reproduced in social contexts. Together, these moments highlight

the resilience of gender norms, but also the opportunities for reimagining and challenging them in the spaces where they are most deeply ingrained.

References

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- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1(2):125-51.