

Gender Matters: Bringing in a Gender Structure Analysis.
A Comment on “Paternal and Maternal Gatekeeping?
Choreographing Care-giving in Families” by Tina Miller
and
“Rethinking Family Socialization to Gender through the Lens of
Multi-local, Post-separation Families” by Laura Merla

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Abstract

In this comment, Risman suggests that both papers show definitely that gender still matters, but how it matters in families is consistently shifting. Both papers provide glimpses into how new family dynamics both reinforce and challenge gender inequality. Risman presents her theoretical framework of gender as a social structure and applies it to each article to analyze what the research teaches us about these families, and what questions remain unanswered.

Keywords: Gender; gender as a social structure; inequalities; family; feminism.

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1 Introduction

These papers can be fairly summed up with the phrase “gender matters.” This is not news. And yet how it matters is constantly shifting and both these papers provide insight into ways that families continue to re-create gender inequality and remain gendered institutions. Both also provide glimpses into how new family dynamics might challenge gender as well. The dialectical circular causation evidenced in both papers is as challenging as ever for feminist analysis and social change. In this short essay, I first present a short summary of each article. I then briefly present my theoretical framework of gender as a social structure, and finish by suggesting how applying that framework to each research article helps understand what we know, and what questions still require more research.

2 Overview of the Articles

Merla offers an intriguing analysis of a family form rarely studied: heterosexual post-separation families. These are previously married couples who continue to co-parent their children. Simply using this new language of post-separation shifts the frame from single parents to duo parents who no longer have a romantic or sexual relationship with one another. Unlike single parent families where one parent is custodial and one is a visitor in their own children’s lives, these children live almost equally (at most 30/70 splits) with both parents. Merla convincingly argues that these families provide scholars the opportunity to study how gender socialization operates within families but between parents in the same family. Gender socialization can differ between households within one family such as one parent banning girly pink clothes and another allowing them. Another example is that one parent may allow more autonomy, particularly to daughters, than another. She suggests that ability to move freely in the world is a kind of capital, and labels it “motility,” suggesting that this freedom is another perk of boyhood, less available to girls. While attention to discrepant gender socialization may be most apparent in separated households, this research theme might also be useful to bring to studies of married parents. Whether all families members agree about gender is worth considering in all research on families. An intriguing new aspect to the study of joint custody post-separation families are the multiple ways for children and their parents to stay in touch, the “polymediated” environment. Merla suggests that some of these mediums are gender neutral but others are deeply gendered, such as snapchat and gaming. This article raises intriguing questions about new family forms. It also reminds us that the existence of such joint parenting post-separation families exist, that men are taking up more of their share of caregiving responsibilities. We must remember that families where both parents earn a living and share the care of their children are themselves the result of feminist changes in our interpersonal lives.

Miller brings a critical gaze to the concept of maternal gate keeping. This concept has been used to help explain the slow rate of men rising to the challenge of equal participation in the home. A short hand for the meaning of the phrase “maternal gate keeping” is “blaming the women.” The argument is that women criticize their husband’s family work, and so the husbands are pushed out of the kitchen, or laundry room. Presumably women do this because they have a strong identity as homemaker, and fear other’s judgement of their own competence, and worry that if their household or child rearing standards are not met, they will be judged negatively by significant others. Or perhaps they have certain standards for cleanliness, child rearing, and even the aesthetics of offspring’s appearance and they do not trust their husbands to do a good enough job. Miller argues convincingly that this theoretical argument is one-sided. Where are the men in this argument? Her findings, based on two small longitudinal qualitative samples in the UK, show that the women are not simply imagining male incompetence, but rather the men are articulating and “doing” incompetence so that the women have to carry the majority of family labor. The men are gatekeeping by ignoring the planning and organization that households require and telling their wives that they are incompetent to do otherwise. Miller’s findings suggest convincingly that maternal gatekeeping is at least partly a reaction to men’s behavior.

3 Introduction of Gender Structure Framework

My gender structure theory (Risman, 2004) synthesizes previous theories into a multi-dimensional framework. Based on an understanding of structure as a dialectical process where causality is recursive (Giddens, 1984), I view gender as a structure that constitutes individuals' personal orientations, interpersonal interactions, and macro-level patterns. Structure, in this approach, does not stand alone having an autonomous determinative influence upon people's lives. Instead, there is a reflexive relationship between structure and individual action, such that individual action is always responding to existing structures in ways that either reinforce these structures or challenge them. Viewing gender as a structure allows for us to understand the way gender shapes ongoing practices at the individual, interactional, and macro level, and how it is through these practices that gender as a structure is sustained, challenged, and reproduced.

Understanding gender as a structure becomes more clear when we consider the interrelation between individual-, interactional-, and macro- dimensions of the gender structure. These three conceptual aspects of the gender structure are mutually constitutive and reflexive. Material and cultural processes at each dimension shape gendered practice within that dimension of analysis and influence the way gender is done at other dimensions. Material processes are based upon physical bodies, laws, or geographical locations and how these impact social lives. Cultural processes are ideological or socially constructed ideas and ideologies that orientate people's perspectives and worldviews. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the three dimensions of the gender structure and the material and cultural processes operating within and between each dimension.

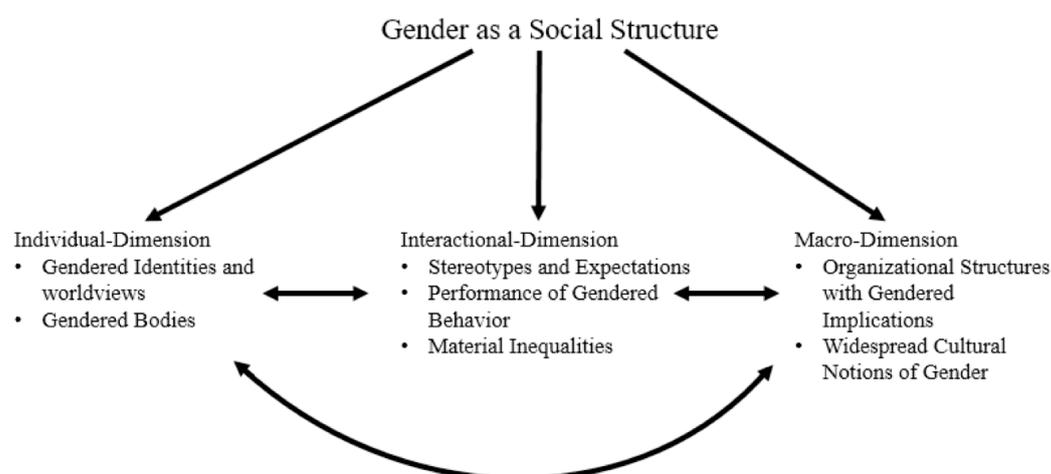


Figure 1

The individual level of the gender structure emphasizes the processes involved in the development of gendered selves and gendered ways of cognitively interpreting the social world. On the side of material processes, biological forces play a small, but significant, part in the formation of gendered personalities and selves. While feminist gender researchers often downplay the role of biological processes in gender (and for good reason, since claims about “natural” body functions have been historically used to marginalize and oppress women (Ehrenreich & English, 1973), recent studies (Davis & Risman, 2015; Auyeung et al., 2009; Hines, Golombok, Rust, Johnston, & Goldinget, 2002) have shown that in utero hormonal levels may play a small if significant role in the formation of gendered personalities. Cultural processes, on the other hand, have been shown to play quite a large role in individuals' development of gendered personalities and worldviews. Theories of personality development focus on the influence of social culture in the way women and men form gendered personalities. Bem's (1993) enculturation

theory, for example, argues that by virtue of growing up in a society where gender differentiation is ubiquitous, where men have more power and resources than women, people learn to interpret social phenomena in gendered ways and internalize such patterns as they become gendered cultural natives. Other scholars have elaborated on Bem's theory, showing how from a young age children make sense of their surroundings by interpreting gendered cues from others (Martin & Ruble, 2004). Parent's encouragement of gender-typical behavior is one way children begin to develop a sense of their gendered identity (Leavell, Tamis-LeMonda, Ruble, Zosuls, & Cabrera, 2012; Lytton & Romney, 1991). Gender socialization has also been documented in the disciplining of speech and body movement that children encounter in school (Martin, 1998).

Material and cultural processes also take place at the interactional dimension of the gender structure. Here, we find the effect of culture in the way gender stereotypes implicitly frame the way individuals interpret the behavior of others so that we more readily see men as competent and more skilled than women (Ridgeway, 2011; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Beyond cognitive bias and stereotypes, cultural processes of gender are also the basis by which interpersonal relationships are performed. West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of "Doing Gender" highlights the way individuals hold each other accountable to behave in ways consistent with what we would expect a woman or a man to do. When women behave in a directive manner, for example, they may receive sanctions from others for transgressing their expectations for how a woman should behave (Eagly, 2007). In addition to cultural processes, material processes also play a role in gendering interactions. For example, the numerical representation of men and women can have an impact on social relationships and organizational policy. Research has found that as women's proportion of managers and corporate board members increase, so does gender equity for employees located below them in organizational hierarchies (Cohen & Huffman, 2007; Cook & Glass, 2014 & 2015; Huffman, Cohen, & Pearlman, 2010; Scarborough, 2017; Skaggs, Stainback, & Duncan, 2012; Stainback, Kleiner, & Skaggs, 2015).

The macro dimension of the gender structure includes a focus on the material rules and regulations that constrain human activity. Each nation state creates laws and regulations that can dramatically alter patterns of gender inequality. Laws such as Title VII of the *Civil Rights Act* and Title IX of the *Education Amendments* in the United States, for example, paved the way for women's entry into higher education and more equal opportunity in paid labor. While these federal acts did not solve issues of gender inequality, they did play a large part in improving equity by officially banning discrimination on the basis of gender and race in paid work and publicly funded education. In addition to the material effects of legal protection, cultural processes play a large role at the macro dimension of the gender structure. Dominant cultural ideologies shape the societal presumptions about what it means to be a woman or a man. Cultural logics shape how we interact with each other. For women, balancing work and family often means justifying their decision to work by explaining that it is "for the family" in order to meet the normative ideal that women are self-sacrificial and family-centered (Damaske, 2011). Men also face challenges in balancing work and family, but since cultural ideals of masculinity require breadwinning, men's life choices tend to be shaped by the expectation that they should "have it all" — a wife, children, career, and a home. Yet, in order to attract a wife and buy the home, many men feel pressures to prioritize their career above all else (Townsend, 2002).

Gender structure theory provides a conceptual framework for understanding the way gender is reproduced through cultural and material processes taking place at individual, interactional, and macro dimensions. At the same time, gender structure theory emphasizes how processes at one dimension influence those taking place in another. For example, macro-level programs such as educational initiatives by the government agencies encouraging young women to learn science and math, can help develop individual-level preferences among young women to pursue jobs in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields. Yet, the potential for change inspired by such macro and individual processes could ultimately be stunted by interactional processes — as women who study or work in STEM fields often face discrimination and alienation by their colleagues, increasing the chance that they will leave the field for one that is less hostile toward women. By thinking about gender as a multi-dimensional framework, we can start to make sense of dynamic patterns of change, both toward more equality and the push-back against it. While processes at one dimension may inspire gender equity, other simultaneous practices at other dimensions may be reproducing systems of inequality. No where is this

dynamic between individual desires, interactional expectations and gender stereotypes, and macro level opportunities and cultural logics more obvious than how we do gender in families, and how families shape how we experience gender as individuals.

In the rest of this response, I will use gender structure theory (Risman, 2004 & 2018) to organize the results offered here, and to illustrate how differentiating between the individual, interactional, and macro levels of the gender structure help us to clarify both social processes that show us how gender matters in this research and guides us with questions for further research.

4 Application of Gender Structure Analysis to Articles

In the rest of this short article, I apply gender structure theory to help understand the research presented by each author. First, we return to the research by Merla on post-separation families. Here there are many findings at the individual level of analysis. The findings suggest that children have developed gendered selves by the time of their parents' separation. Both boys and girls use multiple mediums to stay connected to the parent they are not with at the moment, but boys are more likely to play online video games with their fathers, and girls are more likely to use *Instagram*. Other questions that emerge at the individual level of analysis include whether fathers and mothers parent similarly or whether there are gendered nurturing styles. For those couples in Miller's research who do not share family labor equally, do those men who are most sensitive, empathetic, and nurturing (e.g. more "feminine") share more equally? Do strong, efficient, ambitious mothers demand more equality? That is, do the individual gendered characteristics of husbands and wives predict the egalitarianism of their homes?

At the interactional level, we focus on not on internalized gendered selves but on those expectations of others that guide our relationships. What we do not yet know is whether parents treat boys and girls differently as mobile children. Or perhaps parents bond more closely with same-sex children? But interactional expectations are a two-way street. Do children expect their fathers and mothers to parent differently post-separation? As this research proceeds, I hope that Merla investigates this question. It is critical to understand if necessity is the mother of invention, and single fathers step up to the plate and nurture. Or if the children turn mostly to mothers for their emotional nurturance even while spending time with their fathers. Do girls turn more to mothers, and boys to fathers when parents live separately? These post-separation families offer a fascinating glimpse into the possibility of post-gender family roles. But of course, these families live in communities, and community expectations influence behavior as well. How do gendered expectations of families, neighbors and teachers affect parenting in post-separation families?

At the macro level, does the ideology of mothering and traditional family roles shape these families? In Merla's essay this has not been directly addressed. How effective are post-separation parents at creating post-gender families where both parents come to be seen in their communities as equally responsible for child rearing and household work? Does their very existence challenge, and perhaps even change, our cultural logic about the necessity of gendered parenting?

In the Miller article, the power of interactional gender strategies is thematic. The Miller article focuses specifically on this interactional level, as gatekeeping can be conceptualized as an interactional strategy. She finds that men strategically use incompetence to trigger women's preferences to do it themselves, heretofore known as gatekeeping. Men use interactional strategies to assert incompetence, and shift the burden of family work to their wives. But it is important to note that this interactional strategy presumes, even requires, men who have internalized gendered selves that feel no responsibility for family labor, and so that speaks to the power of gender socialization. Indeed, the reality that their wives let them determine the household labor patterns also speaks to the ways in which subordination, as well as responsibility for nurturance, has been internalized by the women in this study. And of course, the macro cultural logic that leads the couple and the community into which they are embedded also presumes women are responsible for social reproduction and men for breadwinning. And so in this case, the forces at the individual, interactional and macro levels conspire to allow the strategic incompetence to determine the patterns of family labor. Just what happens when feminist women reject the cultural logic would be fascinating future research.

Both of these papers provide intriguing ideas, and findings, to help us better understand the relationship between gender and families. It would indeed be ironic if Merla's research shows us that the most effective way to overcome gender ideology in parenting is for parents to live apart. Few policy makers, or couples, would find that useful as advice. It would be useful, however, if Miller's research suggests that an intervention in claims of strategic male incompetence could help to equalize the family work of husbands and wives. In conclusion, my suggestion is for researchers to identify those processes that shape individuals, that influence our expectations of one another, and our cultural ideologies. And once we identify what re-creates gender, we systematically attempt to undo them. The gender structure is a stratification system, and so it behooves feminist analysis to understand how it operates in order to dismantle it.

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