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## UNDOING GENDER<sup>1</sup>

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*“Doing Gender,” West and Zimmerman’s (1987) landmark article, highlighted the importance of social interaction, thus revealing the weaknesses of socialization and structural approaches. However, despite its revolutionary potential for illuminating how to dismantle the gender system, doing gender has become a theory of gender persistence and the inevitability of inequality. In this article, the author argues that we need to reframe the questions to ask how we can undo gender. Research should focus on (1) when and how social interactions become less gendered, (2) whether gender can be irrelevant in interaction, (3) whether gendered interactions always underwrite inequality, (4) how the institutional and interactional levels work together to produce change, and (5) interaction as the site of change.*

**Keywords:** *gender; gender oppression; gender difference; social change*

“**D**oing Gender,” the groundbreaking article by Candace West and Don Zimmerman, appeared in the first issue of *Gender & Society* in 1987. Arguably one of the most important writings in the contemporary study of gender, “Doing Gender” has been cited 634 times, including 60 times in 2005 alone (<http://portal.isiknowledge.com.proxy.mtholyoke.edu:2048/portal.cgi?DestApp=WOS&Func=Frame>). West and Zimmerman argued that gender is not something we are, but something we do. Gender must be continually socially reconstructed in light of “normative conceptions” of men and women. People act with the awareness that they will be judged according to what is deemed appropriate feminine or masculine

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behavior. These normative conceptions of men and women vary across time, ethnic group, and social situation, but the opportunity to behave as manly men or womanly women is ubiquitous. Thus, gender is an ongoing emergent aspect of social interaction.

Although the doing gender approach has benefited the study of gender in extremely important ways, unfortunately, the definition proposed in the original article and the language inherent in the phrase “doing gender” have undermined the goal of dismantling gender inequity by, perhaps inadvertently, perpetuating the idea that the gender system of oppression is hopelessly impervious to real change and by ignoring the links between social interaction and structural change. It is time to put the spotlight squarely on the social processes that underlie resistance against conventional gender relations and on how successful change in the power dynamics and inequities between men and women can be accomplished. Namely, we need to shift from talk about doing gender to illuminating how we can undo gender. My argument dovetails with those of other feminist theorists who articulate hopeful visions of change and the possibility of gender equality. Lorber’s (2005) notion of “degendering” and Risman’s (1998) conception of “gender vertigo” both speak to the dismantling of gender that will be addressed in this article.

### IMPORTANCE OF “DOING GENDER”

“Doing Gender” changed the focus of study in four important ways. First, it de-emphasized socialization as the basis for gendered difference between men and women (Green 2005; Risman 1998). Rather than internalize a set of behaviors and practices or identities that were rewarded and modeled by parents, teachers, and other authority figures, men and women create gender within social relationships throughout their lives. This formulation assumes that gender is dynamic and that what is considered appropriate gendered behavior changes over time (Thorne 2002). Whereas socialization theories assume that individuals internalize the gendered norms that were salient when they were growing up, the doing gender model assumes that people respond to changing contemporary norms. To change gender relations does not mean to wait for another generation to be socialized differently. Women today who grew up in the 1950s can lead radically different lives than their mothers. Gender construction points to the possibility of revolutionary change within a much shorter time span than implied by socialization approaches.

Just as “Doing Gender” undermined psychologically oriented socialization theories, it also exposed the weaknesses of deterministic structural

accounts of gender. Structural accounts assume that gender differences arise from the different resources to which men and women have access or the different social locations they occupy. For example, a structural approach might explain women's disproportionate share of housework as a function of their husbands' incomes: Men do less housework because their greater incomes give them the power to opt out of it (e.g., Izraeli 1994). However, studies based on the doing gender approach demonstrate that inequality in the distribution of household labor persists even when women contribute half of the household income (Berk 1985) and is sometimes exaggerated when women earn more money than men (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Mannino and Deutsch 2005). Even when structural conditions produce gender difference and inequality, these are mediated through social interactions that always contain the potential for resistance.

"Doing Gender" alerted us to the taken-for-granted expressions of difference that appear natural but are not. These differences must be continually reconstructed to maintain the appearance of naturalness. It emphasized the myriad ways in which gender is produced across cultures and subcultures. We now talk about masculinities and femininities as projects to be accomplished in varying ways depending on the social context (e.g., Connell 1995). Gender is produced differently among white blue-collar laborers, unemployed African Americans, white software developers, and Black physicians.

Finally, the doing gender approach implies that if gender is constructed, then it can be deconstructed. Gendered institutions can be changed, and the social interactions that support them can be undone. This revolutionary potential of human agency is the most important contribution of this approach (Andersen 2005). Yet ironically, West and Zimmerman's (1987) article has typically been used to show how gender relations are maintained and even to argue that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Doing gender has become a theory of conformity and gender conventionality, albeit of multiple forms of conventionality.

### A THEORY OF GENDER MAINTENANCE

Faced with the criticism that doing gender is a theory of gender conformity (Weber 2002; Winant 2002), West and Fenstermaker (2002b) reiterated the potential for change within this approach. Nonetheless, their definition of doing gender and their assumption of the universality and ubiquity of doing gender are incompatible with a theory of change. First, they define doing gender as "to engage in behavior at the risk of gender

assessment” (West and Zimmerman 2002, 13). That is, to do gender is to act with the possibility that one will be judged according to normative standards applied to one’s sex category—to be accountable to that sex category. West and Zimmerman (2002) indicate that doing gender applies whether one conforms to gendered norms or resists them because, based on their definition, in either case one is acting “at risk” of being judged according to those norms. By emphasizing the definitional equivalence of compliance and resistance, the theory renders resistance invisible, particularly because West and Zimmerman’s emphasis on evaluation by gendered norms makes it easy to see why men and women would comply and difficult to explain why they would resist. Moreover, since people are still doing gender when they transgress according to this view, it is difficult to imagine how the theory could ultimately lead us to understand how gender inequality could be dismantled.

In one of their articles, West and Fenstermaker (2002a, 53) do acknowledge that individual “failure to live up to normative conceptions” of womanly or manly behavior in a given situation may weaken the link between that particular normative conduct and the sex category. Nonetheless, they argue that although a particular behavior might lose its relevance to a sex category, “accountability is invariant and hence doing gender is unavoidable” (West and Fenstermaker 2002a, 54).

They also assert the invariance of the belief in essential differences between men and women: “What is constant is the notion that men and women have different natures as derived from incumbency in one or the other sex category” (Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 2002, 30). Although they acknowledge that particular differences may vary from culture to culture or within a society over time, they imply that the omnipresence of gender as a created system of difference will always bolster a system of inequality. West and colleagues appear to preclude the possibility that gender could be eliminated or that some forms of gender might be compatible with equality between men and women (West and Fenstermaker 2002a).

Finally, even their language, which uses the word “doing,” evokes the notion of creating difference rather than erasing it. In fact, one of their key points is that gender is an accomplishment that is created and re-created in social interaction. That emphasis puts the spotlight on the development of differences that legitimate discrimination and inequality based on sex category. The enormous contribution of their theory was to draw attention to the missing piece in the story of gender inequality: the importance of the interactional level. But the flaws in how the theory brought social interaction to the forefront have undermined its potential as a theory of resistance.

### CURRENT USES OF “DOING GENDER”

To assess how the theory is currently being used empirically, I surveyed the articles published in 2005 that cited the original West and Zimmerman (1987) article. The majority of these articles describe how gender differences are constructed and preserved in different domains. For example, Stobbe (2005) explores the justifications that auto body workers give for why women are employed in such small numbers in their industry. The men emphasized the unsuitability of dirty work for women and women's unavailability for training because of family responsibilities. The men's discourses create differences between women and themselves, “machismo” men, presumably available and suitable for the dirty work of fixing cars.

Although the study of autoworkers focused on men in a conventionally masculine occupation, most of the studies in 2005 that cite West and Zimmerman (1987) examine women and men in unconventional gender situations, occupations, or pursuits that could potentially disrupt gender relations. Nevertheless, the underlying story in these articles is that gender is preserved, despite the threat to male/female differences and men's power in domestic roles, employment, social interaction, and leisure pursuits. For example, in the domestic sphere, Halleröd (2005) shows that Swedish men who earned a lower rate of income than their wives avoided economic dependence on them by increasing the number of hours they worked outside the home. If husbands did earn less overall than their wives, they decreased the amount of housework they did. Both of these strategies defy rational economic models and show how men create gender consistent with masculine norms that prescribe breadwinning and exemption from housework. Likewise, rural women driven into the labor market because of the tenuous economic position of the family farm derived less power from their economic contributions than they might have because they colluded in representing their market work as evidence of being good farm wives who, through hard work and self-sacrifice, put the survival of the farm first. Despite the importance of their economic contributions, they maintained subordinate positions in their families as helpmates to their farmer husbands (Heather et al. 2005).

Several studies of women in masculine occupations showed how they carefully negotiated a uniquely feminine way of implementing their professional roles, thereby accomplishing gender and professional credibility simultaneously. For example, Søndergaard (2005) examines how young Danish academic women created a different kind of relationship with older male colleagues than did young men. Among other strategies, they joked

about gender to reduce the tension of their otherwise incongruous relationship. Older women in academia walked a careful line, allowing men to carry forward their ideas and engaging in talk about home and family necessary to establish themselves as feminine women, but only during breaks in the academic discussion so as to maintain their professional stature. Likewise, a survey of Methodist clergywomen highlighted that in carrying out their responsibilities, they responded to the congregation's expectation for them to be especially compassionate and loving by emphasizing the nurturing and caring (i.e., maternal) characteristics of their ministerial role rather than its more administrative functions (Frame and Shehan 2005).

In Australia, Pini (2005b) documents how the few women who became agricultural leaders carved out gendered roles for themselves that entailed both concealing femininity by wearing dark suits and enacting some aspects of conventional masculinity (e.g., doing dirty work and demonstrating their ability to use farm machinery) but, at the same time, preserved their femininity, as the ministers did, by asserting a "nurturing, communicative, and empathic" type of leadership (Pini 2005b, 82). To be taken seriously as leaders, Pini argues, the female agricultural leaders had to create themselves as a third sex, which bodes ill for gender equity. The notion of a third sex still underlines the difference between men and women.

Sport represents another traditionally male domain that women now enter and must negotiate. George analyzes the behavior of elite female soccer players to uncover "intricate and nuanced ways women do gender" (George 2005, 341) in this context. The women had to manage building up their bodies to ensure the strength needed for soccer while at the same time avoiding the development of too much muscle. Subtle and not-so-subtle messages from coaches, parents, teammates, and men communicated that they should look feminine. Male soccer players, in contrast, could work out with impunity because soccer training only enhances their masculinity. Thus, although soccer playing may seem the same for men and women, they do gender by adopting different approaches to the development and display of their bodies.

Golf is constructed as a male sport by using women's shorter driving distances to confirm that women slow down play, without consideration of whether straighter drives can be as effective as longer ones, and by a culture that is distinctly women unfriendly. McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple (2005) describe how women golfers continue to play a "male" sport by accommodating and limiting their play to women-friendly situations, women partners, and courses with fewer long holes. They cite West and Zimmerman (1987) to underline that individual strategies cannot challenge a system of discrimination.

The research interview itself also provides an occasion for doing gender. The interviewer, who frames and controls the conversation, holds a more powerful position in the conversation than the interviewee. When the interviewer is a woman and the interviewee is a man, their positions in the interview could challenge conventional gender relations. Female researchers have reported that their male interviewees resist that challenge by asserting their masculinity during the interview. For example, in a qualitative study of violent male offenders, the men acted alternatively chivalrous or controlling toward the interviewer and sometimes made verbal reference to gender by calling the interviewer "honey" or "sweetheart," behaviors all designed to create and communicate heterosexual masculinity (Presser 2005). Likewise, Pini (2005a) reports that the cane growers she interviewed in Australia used the interviews to assert their masculinity by addressing her by her first name, talking condescendingly to her about cane growing, and engaging in sexual innuendo.

Interestingly, a male interviewer who talked with the wives of sports figures had to create what he called "muted masculinity" to successfully get the women to talk with him, eschewing heterosexual displays and engaging in more characteristically "feminine" empathic listening behavior (Ortiz 2005). Although the male interviewer's behavior avoided stereotypically masculine behavior, and could be viewed as an instance of reducing gender differences, instead, the researcher described it as creating a different kind of masculinity.

Researchers who invoke West and Zimmerman (1987) do write about gender resistance, but it is often to recount its futility. For example, Sargent (2005) describes the dilemma of male early childhood educators who wanted to nurture children in the ways characteristic of mothers but were constrained to behave more stereotypically. Unless they adapted more distant and masculine ways of being with children, men who nurtured were under suspicion of being pedophiles. Moreover, male teachers, who might have preferred not to be disciplinarians, were often given the most difficult children, thrusting them into the role of disciplinarian and thereby creating the self-fulfilling prophecy that men discipline.

Likewise, an ethnographic study of Danish adolescents details the consequences to a Danish girl who tried to defy the normative constraints of being female and white by befriending Turkish boys. This problematic behavior got her treated as a "slut." The authors argued that girls who transgress gender norms are sanctioned with the suspicion of either promiscuity or asexuality (Staunæs 2005).

In 2005, the few scholars who asserted the possibility of gender resistance and also cited West and Zimmerman (1987), cited them, not to

explain change, but to contrast the doing gender approach with the structural arguments that were used to explain change (Gershuny, Bittman, and Brice 2005; McGinnis, McQuillan, and Chapple 2005). Dworkin and O'Sullivan (2005) do invoke everyday interactions as a source of resistance to prevailing sexual scripts. However, even they cite West and Zimmerman, not to explain that resistance, but to describe conventional masculine behavior during their interviews.

Only one of the 2005 articles I reviewed examined the transformative potential of West and Zimmerman's (1987) social constructionist approach. Shaw (2005) argues that leisure is a site for challenging gender ideologies that underwrite and justify power differences between men and women. When women refuse to conform to gender norms, take time for recreation despite family responsibilities, and engage in "male" pursuits such as golf, they undermine the stereotypical perceptions that buoy up an ideology of inequality. Nevertheless, despite this exception, to do gender in the overwhelming majority of the studies conducted in 2005 is to act according to gendered norms.

### A PROPOSED SHIFT IN RESEARCH AGENDAS

While not accepting or justifying the existence of any gender inequality, researchers need to focus more on the variations in gender inequality that exist across societies, over time, and even within a society (Chafetz 1990, 2004; Fox 2001). The research derived from West and colleagues' approach often implies that gender inequality is invariant and that the degree of inequality is irrelevant. However, it is critical to acknowledge and examine that variability so that we can understand the conditions under which change for the better occurs.

Women who work as professors, agricultural leaders, and clergy may have to be mindful of how to negotiate gendered terrain, but at least they are on the hike. Female interviewees may have to contend with male interviewees' attempts to reassert male power, but in the end, the interviewer writes the article that defines the interaction between them. Female athletes may worry about how sports workouts can make them look unfeminine, but title IX indisputably gave them revolutionary access to sports.

It seems disingenuous for those of us who have succeeded in the academy to fail to acknowledge that our lives, while not free of gender discrimination, are a hell of a lot better than our mothers' lives were. Who among us would trade life as an upper-middle-class professional woman in the twenty-first century for what would/could have been our lives in the

1950s? That being said, those of us who are privileged enough to be full professors can look around and see that we are mostly white and come from middle-class backgrounds. Depending on which women we consider, around the world or in the United States, some women's lives are worse today than 50 years ago. Arguably, for example, the globalization that rips women from developing countries away from their children to do domestic labor in richer countries may be diminishing their lives (Hochschild 2000). The point of this thought experiment is to show that we do know implicitly that gender inequality varies across time and place. Certainly, we have to continue to investigate and dismantle structures that underwrite the glaring economic injustices that face most women in the world.

The doing gender approach, with its focus on everyday interaction, however, works well to illuminate the gender inequality that persists in the face of the crude examples of structural change that I have invoked. And I do not mean to suggest that we should ignore the persistence of that inequality. As I mentioned earlier, one of the major contributions of the approach is to examine the limits of structural change. What I believe researchers often ignore is how focus on the interactional level can also illuminate the possibility of change. The study of the interactional level could expand beyond simply documenting the persistence of inequality to examine (1) when and how social interactions become less gendered, not just differently gendered; (2) the conditions under which gender is irrelevant in social interactions; (3) whether all gendered interactions reinforce inequality; (4) how the structural (institutional) and interactional levels might work together to produce change; and (5) interaction as the site of change. One of the important contributions of West and Zimmerman (1987) was to highlight the importance of the interactional level for understanding the persistence of unequal gender relations. My plea is that we shift our inquiry about ongoing social interactions to focus on change. Although I do not have the answers, I believe we should change the questions.

### **Reducing Gender Difference**

Structural approaches argue that gendered behavior and the perception of gender difference grow out of the different social locations occupied by men and women (Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). Women act like women because the positions they occupy require feminine behavior. Men act like men because the social positions they occupy require competence, leadership, physical strength, and autonomy. Presumably, then, change that results in more gender similarity in social location should reduce gender difference and the perception of difference. However, many of the doing gender studies

illustrate that when men enter a “female” job or women enter a “male” job, they are constrained to perform that job according to gendered norms, which then reproduces gender within that job. So, whereas previously, gender was created by excluding men or women, after the admission of the excluded group, gender is created by differential treatment, behavior, and the interpretation of the behavior of the men and women.

I do not dispute that this phenomenon occurs, but two empirical questions should be raised. First, even if difference is maintained, is it reduced? How does the entry of women and men into nontraditional jobs and occupations affect the perception of difference between men and women? Although structuralists may underestimate the persistence of difference, social constructionists may be exaggerating it. For example, exposure to women in leadership positions may decrease the difference in how competent and assertive men and women are perceived to be, despite the feminine performance of the leadership role. Second, we need to look over time. American parents’ perceptions of their newborn babies, for example, have changed during the past few decades. In the mid-1970s, when parents were asked to rate their newborns on a wide variety of traits, girls were rated softer, finer featured, littler, and more inattentive than boys (Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria 1974). Fathers were especially likely to stereotype their tiny babies, and, in addition, rated daughters weaker and more delicate than sons. Twenty years later, parental gender stereotypes of newborns still existed on some traits, but there were fewer, and differences between mothers’ and fathers’ propensity to stereotype had disappeared (Karraker, Vogel, and Lake 1995).

When gender barriers for particular positions begin to crumble, a backlash may promote the re-creation of gender differences. However, that backlash might diminish if the distribution of men and women in those positions became more equal.

Also, perhaps differences that have no material foundation diminish over time. For example, consider women who earn as much as their husbands do. Some studies show that different meanings are ascribed to wives’ and husbands’ earnings. Husbands are conceived of as breadwinners; wives are not. However, we need to monitor whether that difference in interpretation and labeling persists over time in the face of material similarity, either within a couple whose earnings are the same, or at the societal level, when an increasing number of husbands and wives earn similar incomes. As a desperate and fragile attempt to maintain a gendered difference where none exists, differential labeling of the same behavior might be doomed to failure. Only longitudinal studies can answer this question. In fact, one longitudinal study did

find that when men earned less than their wives, over time, their attitudes about gender became more egalitarian, which in turn maintained their lowered breadwinning status (Zuo 2004).

### Gender Irrelevance

The argument that people are always and everywhere accountable to gendered norms presupposes that perceptions of other people are always gendered. Gender, according to this claim, is a master status that overrides any other role or status. Regardless of whether one is interacting with a doctor, a lawyer, or a car mechanic, the perception of that person and therefore interaction with him or her is filtered through the lens of gender. We pay attention and process that the doctor is female, the lawyer is male, and so is the car mechanic. Ridgeway's theory of status expectations, which describes the processes by which female disadvantage is continually reproduced, rests on the assumption that sex is a master status. When sex category is activated, the stereotypes associated with it are also automatically activated. Thus, in a wide variety of situations, men are automatically viewed as more competent, giving them advantages that can easily lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

To their credit, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) cite studies of cognitive psychologists to support their claims that sex category is ubiquitously and automatically processed in social interactions. However, although some studies do make that claim (Stangor et al. 1992), it is more controversial than they indicate. Cognitive psychologists' methods assess whether exposure to a particular category, with or without awareness of the perceiver, automatically accesses categorical stereotypes. Although these studies show that stereotypes can be and often are activated automatically, a number of factors can reduce automatic access to stereotypes, including cognitive busyness (Gilbert and Hixon 1991)<sup>2</sup>, self-interested motives, exposure to counter-stereotypical images and thoughts, and intentional attempts to avoid prejudice (Blair and Banaji 1996; Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000). Focus of attention can influence whether gender is processed automatically in the context of multiple possibilities for categorization. For example, when a Chinese woman is observed putting on makeup, gender but not Chinese identity is accessed automatically, whereas Chinese identity but not gender is accessed when she is observed using chopsticks (Blair 2002). Ridgeway and Correll (2004) acknowledge that gender, although always lurking in the background, varies in salience across different situations. However, my point is that under some conditions, it may be so irrelevant that it is not even accessed.

### **Does Difference Always Mean Inequality?**

West and Zimmerman (1987) as well as others (e.g., Chafetz 1990; Lorber 2005; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 1998, 2004) argue that the creation of gender bolsters a system of inequality between men and women. Lorber (2005, xx) has recently gone further and urges feminists to “challenge the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continual reappearance of gender inequality.” Her project is the elimination of the binary gendered categories of men and women, which, she believes, cannot help but contribute to inequality. She also makes the important point that including the multiple categories that intersect with gender (e.g., social class, race, sexual orientation) already begins to break down the dichotomous notion of gender.

Other theorists argue that difference per se is not the problem with the gender system; the problem is power (Collins 2002; Connell 1995). Men have more say, and they get more money, more attention, more interesting work, more status, and more leisure. Masculine pursuits are given greater value. But can gendered differences exist without supporting these power differences? Certainly, at an individual couple level, they can. For example, in research on equally shared parenting, couples created equality with varying degrees of gendered behavior. Some created a genderless model by taking turns and equalizing all aspects of parenting. Others, however, divided the work equally overall but specialized in aspects of parenting that were more or less gendered (Deutsch 1999). She cooked and he cleaned; she comforted and he helped with homework.

Although the maintenance of gendered differences may work for couples on an individual level, it is unclear whether it can on a societal level. The question is, If difference can and usually does support gender oppression, must it? Consider the parenting example. Although given couples might equally share while maintaining gendered aspects of parenting, their example might make it less likely that other couples will share because it reinforces stereotypes. Alternatively, a gendered form of equal parenting might render equality achievable to others who might otherwise dismiss it as impossible.

### **Structure and Interaction**

Gender operates at multiple levels (Lorber 2005; Risman 1998, 2004; Pfau-Effinger 1999). To understand change, we need to theorize and research the relations between the structural and interactional levels. Some researchers already do. For example, in status expectations theory, Ridgeway

and Correll (2004) argue that the ubiquitous perception of superior male competence creates biases that continually reproduce female disadvantage. Even when women make inroads into a particular field, that field becomes feminized and subsequently devalued. They show how cognitive biases at the interactional level can undermine and reverse structural change. But in addition to illustrating the processes by which an oppressive gender system is maintained, they also theorize about the ways in which it could be changed (Ridgeway and Correll 2000). The key changes they propose, which include affirmative action, equal pay and comparable worth, open information about wages, bureaucratic accountability for work-related evaluations, and family-friendly workplace policies, all entail structural changes. These structural changes would promote changes at the interactional level by undermining the perception that women are less competent than men in the domains that matter. Incremental effects that flow from this changed perception could accumulate to produce gender equality.

Chafetz's (1990) theory of gender equity also articulates the relation between the structural and interactional levels. She argues that technological change and economic expansion are key to changes in the gender system because they increase women's access to resource-producing roles. Specifically, increased job opportunities for women mean that they can earn money and become less economically dependent on men. An increase in resources increases women's micro-level power within the family and, at the macro level, contributes to the development of gender consciousness, which in turn promotes new gender definitions that shape individuals' behavior and reduce gender difference. Chafetz cites evidence of massive changes in gender attitudes during the past 40 years in the United States that have paralleled women's, especially married women's, influx into the labor force. At the same time, she acknowledges the resistance put up by men who are losing power at the micro level. Change is uneven. Resistance creates new social problems such as the feminization of poverty, sexual harassment at the workplace, and women's double day of paid and unpaid labor. Nonetheless, Chafetz argues that despite resistance and despite the cultural lag between the development of egalitarian attitudes and the reduction of gendered behavior, a new generation that has grown up with changed gender definitions should create a world of greater gender equality.

Other empirical studies verify that micro-level gender relations inside the family depend on the structural conditions under which they occur. For example, using a game theory approach, Breen and Cooke (2005) show that the successful negotiations over a more equal division of household labor depend on the percentage of men who are willing to adjust their behavior to

avoid divorce and the percentage of women who are willing to forgo marriage rather than shoulder an unwanted share of domestic work. Negotiations within the couple are shaped by plausible hypothetical alternative deals outside the marriage.

In a study that examined the predictors of the division of household labor in Norway, Britain, and the Czech Republic, the country in which the couple resided affected their division of labor over and above the similarity of husbands' and wives' incomes and their attitudes toward gender and domestic labor (Crompton and Harris 1999). Couples negotiated a division of labor living in a particular country where other people's views and behavior matter, and where government policies can support or thwart individual couples' efforts to forge equal relationships. For example, in Norway, 80 percent of fathers take advantage of a policy that mandates four weeks of paternal leave that would be lost if not used (Ellingsaeter 1999). Obviously, 20 percent do not take the leave, but certainly the existence of leave facilitates mothers' negotiations for fathers' involvement.

The governmental policy in Norway supports paternal involvement, but couples still have to make the decision to use it. Benjamin and Sullivan (1999) also argue that change involves both institutional and relational resources. They studied women in professions that varied in terms of remuneration and the use of communication skills. They hypothesized and found that the women whose jobs entailed both communication skills and high pay (i.e., marriage counselors) were most able to change the distribution of housework. In contrast, accountants, who brought the highest material resources into their marriages but whose work did not depend on communication skills, had the least change. In fact, in the absence of relationship skills, housework was often excluded as a topic of conversation, presumably to avoid conflict. Conversely, women with high relational resources but low material resources were also unlikely to get change. Both structural and interactional resources were necessary to create a more egalitarian division of labor.

Structural changes, such as the admittance of women into high-paying professions or policies that encourage men's participation in domestic labor, create the possibility for change at the interactional level. However, they do not ensure it. Pfau-Effinger (1999), for example, shows how different historical traditions in West Germany, the Netherlands, and Finland affect movement toward gender equality. Finland's history of full-time work for women in agriculture has facilitated the use of government policies that promote equality through the use of government institutions to care for children. In contrast, in the Netherlands, where the housewife

ideal prevailed in the 1950s, explicit policies in the 1980s to promote an egalitarian model of dual earner/dual careers has facilitated part-time work for women, but equal fatherhood has lagged far behind.

When change occurs at the interactional level, its overall impact is unclear. A number of gender theorists and researchers make a distinction between “transgressive” and “transformational” change (e.g., Le Feuvre 1999; Lorber 1999). Individual women may “transgress” gendered norms in social interactions, but that may have little effect on overall opportunities for women without “a politics of transformation” (Lorber 1999) that changes the power structure between men and women (Gerson and Peiss 1985).

As we examine the connections between interactional and institutional change, it is imperative that we be mindful of the intersections of race and class with gender. For example, for women of color who are often poor, institutional change is likely to take priority. An increase in the minimum wage, subsidized child care, and regulation of paid domestic labor may be critically important for undoing the oppressive effects of gender. In contrast, for white affluent women who have already benefited from structural changes that admit women into the professions and into high-paying jobs, resistance against gendered norms in day-to-day marital interactions may be essential for undoing gender. I do not want to overstate this contrast, however. Mary Romero (1988), for example, shows how Latina women professionalize their paid domestic labor in part by interactional resistance to their employers’ attempts to make it more informal. Conversely, affluent white women would benefit from the kinds of institutional policy changes in the workplace that Lorber (2005) argues for, which include rescheduling work time for all workers to make it compatible with family life. My point is not to argue *a priori* about the relative merits of targeting interactional or institutional change for particular groups, but to urge research to address those questions. Just as the form that gender oppression takes varies across race and class, what it will take to undo it will vary as well. The best targets of resistance will depend on who is to benefit.

### **Interaction as a Site of Change**

If we take a social constructionist position seriously, we must examine resistance to gendered social interactions as a source of change (Sullivan 2004). By examining the effects of subversive action on its audience, we may be able to identify the conditions under which those actions change normative conceptions of gender, and how and when these new conceptions can take advantage of or even drive institutional change. Shaw

(2001), for example, takes this approach. Shaw examines leisure as a site of resistance, and considers individual acts, such as a girl's joining a boy's hockey team or a mother's taking leisure time. She argues that these acts of resistance can do more than simply expand that individual's identity (i.e., what other theorists would call "transgression"). Girls who see another girl on the hockey team may realize that they too have the possibility of playing hockey. Women who witness other mothers who take leisure may be emboldened to do so themselves.

Likewise, research on equally shared parenting demonstrates that parenting need not be gendered (Deutsch 1999; Lorber 2005; Risman 1998). Interestingly, compared to conventional parents, equally sharing parents were far more likely to know couples who had degendered parenting (Deutsch 1999). Although we do not know the causal direction, those friends may have been a source of inspiration for their own unconventional lives.

Resistant acts can also affect discourses about gender. Although currently many studies describe how acts of resistance are explained away, some do examine how they can be taken up in social interactions. For example, Hollander (2002) examines social discourse about rape attempts, noting that although 75 percent of rape attempts are successfully thwarted, those facts are at odds with gendered conceptions of men and women, which include that men, especially Black men, are dangerous, and women, especially white women, are vulnerable. In an analysis of focus groups' conversations about violence, Hollander observes that alternative discourses about gender (e.g., "I'd fight back"), although often discounted, were taken up and supported by the group in one-third of the instances. She argues that alternative discourses can create alternative conceptions of gender.

Changed conceptions of gender can inform a feminist gender consciousness that propels a feminist movement (Chafetz 1990). When individuals challenge boundaries by resisting conventional gendered behavior in ongoing social interactions, it can facilitate feminist consciousness (Gerson and Peiss 1985), or at least we ought to be examining if and when it does. Institutions may be impervious to individual acts, but acts that change consciousness could encourage collective action to transform institutions.

Gender differs from other axes of oppression because many of the inequities women suffer occur in everyday interactions in their own homes. Without discounting the distal (i.e., institutional) causes of women's oppression, such as lack of access to material resources, we can acknowledge that interactions in families are often the proximal causes of women's being overworked, underfed, and/or the victims of violence. But the family is also a potential source of women's power. Men sometimes need and want love

and care from women enough to be willing to trade power for it. Love for mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends may even be a force that propels some men into becoming allies in a feminist movement.

## UNDOING GENDER

The language we use shapes what our minds are drawn to (Lakoff 2004). Therefore, I propose that we adopt a new convention, namely, that we reserve the phrase "doing gender" to refer to social interactions that reproduce gender difference and use the phrase "undoing gender" to refer to social interactions that reduce gender difference.

West and Zimmerman (1987) presumably coined the phrase "doing gender" for good reason. The word "do" denotes action: "to perform, to execute, to accomplish, finish, complete, to exert, to bring about: effect" (Random House 2003). "Doing" is an excellent word to emphasize that gender is created continually in ubiquitous ongoing social interactions. However, if "do" refers to something that is accomplished, or brought about, then "doing gender" will bring to mind the accomplishment of gender difference rather than the dismantling of difference. Although West and Zimmerman define "doing gender" to encompass both conformity and resistance, the commonsense use of the language orients us toward conformity.

As a quick and dirty experiment, my students and I had 104 people, who had never taken a women's studies course, randomly assigned to define either the phrase "doing gender" or the phrase "undoing gender." Of the 52 definitions of "doing gender" that we collected, 30 explicitly referred to acting in accordance with gender stereotypes, whereas only 3 referred to thwarting stereotypes. (The others gave a variety of answers that could not be classified according to that dimension, including "To study gender" and "Does it have to do with sex?") Conversely, of the 52 definitions of "undoing gender," 34 referred to behaving in opposition to gender stereotypes, avoiding the use of stereotypes in evaluating others, or dismantling gender barriers; not one invoked conforming to gender stereotypes. (Most of the others referred to sexual behaviors that could be seen as violations of gender stereotypes.) Clearly, in common parlance, the phrase "doing gender" evokes conformity; "undoing gender" evokes resistance. The prevalence of research on gender conformity that has grown out of the doing gender approach argues that gender researchers are also influenced by this linguistic frame. In fact, sometimes researchers explicitly use the phrase "doing gender" to mean conformity to gendered norms (e.g., De Welde 2003; Fox 2001; Risman 2004).

Words matter. Feminists rightly argued that the use of the generic “he,” although ostensibly referring to men and women, in fact made women invisible. Similarly, the phrase “doing gender,” which ostensibly means either conformity or resistance, renders resistance invisible. Of course, it is going to take a lot more than changing terms to understand how to eliminate the gender system. But at least paying attention to how we can undo gender may keep us focused on the central question: How can we dismantle the gender system to create real equality between men and women?

### NOTES

1. With apologies to Judith Butler. I have been thinking about writing an article with this title for years and had no idea until after it was reviewed that Butler (2004) had written a book titled *Undoing Gender*.
2. Under some conditions, cognitive busyness (i.e., load) can also increase stereotyping (Biernat, Kobrynowicz, and Weber 2003).

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