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**Enforcement and Emancipation:
Engagement of Gender in Narratives of College Students**

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CST 475: Senior Project

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Abstract

Through analyzing the narratives of ten college students, this study sought to find how the language used in narratives describes and engages with gender, and how narratives depict gendered privilege and oppression. Findings include that participants engaged with their gender through describing how their gender has been formed, enforced, and performed, with many also describing ways in which they are reconstructing gender, whether that be through going against expectations or redefining gendered terms. The study affirmed the prevalence of underlying gendered power structures that impact how individuals perceive and perform their gender, but also provides hope in the apparent malleability of these structures. Other areas of significance include further insight into the importance of viewing people as crystallized selves, and the practical application of an emphasis on shared humanity.

Keywords: gender, narrative, privilege, oppression, Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory, Feminist Rhetorical Criticism, crystallized selves

Enforcement and Emancipation:

Engagement of Gender in Narratives of College Students

Gender is an element of our identities that impacts us every day, whether we realize it does or not. For the vast majority of individuals, we are ascribed a gender identity that supposedly aligns with our biological sex, but how we interact with these ascriptions varies hugely from person to person, with some embracing the roles expected of them while others consciously work to adapt their gendered expression and identity outside of what is assumed of them. This study seeks to provide insight into how college students engage with their gender through narrative analysis, a process that allows for participants to reflect upon and define their experiences as they see fit, as well as seeing how privilege and oppression are represented in their narratives.

Research such as this is necessary to begin to address the underlying power structures that exist in our society, with this study chiefly examining the patriarchal systems that impact all people, but put women, non-binary people, trans men, and non-masculine expressions at significant disadvantages. After these structures and privileges can be acknowledged, there is capacity for change within these systems as well as beyond them as groups adapt to more inclusive definitions and expectations of individuals.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this study covered many topics and theories: identity formation and definition, gender identity and expression, privilege, oppression, gendered language, crystallized selves, Cultural Identity (Negotiation) Theory, and Feminist Rhetorical Criticism. The articles read were then coded and thematized in the following categories: “Identities as Fluid and Multifaceted,” “Who is Allowed a Sense of Self?,” “Non-Masculine as

Defined by Masculine,” and “Language as a Vehicle of the Patriarchy.” After these explorations of relevant literature, rationale is given for the study’s research questions.

Identities as Fluid and Multifaceted

A general comprehension of identity is necessary to understanding the stakes of this study, with the most important notion being that someone does not have one fundamental identity, but rather has many elements that make up their identity. Muhammadi explains that “an individual plays different roles in society. His or her identity keeps changing according to context in time and space” (2016, p. 253). This idea is echoed by Collier, who emphasizes that “because individuals enact multiple identities, all voices within each identity group do not speak in the same way or have the same recognition by others” (2009, p. 261), effectively acknowledging the influence that varying identities and accesses to power have on an individual’s view of their identity.

Collier (2009) expands further on the influences of outside forces through a discussion of the differences between avowal and ascription—the former defined as “personal articulation of one’s views about group identity... [while] *ascription* referred to how one refers to others” (p. 261). With this in mind, Collier explains that “identity construction is part reaction to past ascriptions and part ongoing and dynamic avowal of identity claims” (2009, pp. 261-262), also noting that these identities “are affected not only by historical events and political conditions but also by who is present and the situation or site of interaction or public discourse” (p. 262).

Cultural Identity (Negotiation) Theory. To address these complexities of identity construction and continuation, Collier discusses the complementary theories of Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) and Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory (CINT). CIT “called for researchers to recognize the influence of ascriptions and representations found in public texts and the role of

structures such as institutional policies and ideologies on identity politics and negotiation” (Collier, 2009, p. 262), while the latter emphasizes “stressing the role of contextual negotiation of multiple identities and relationships” (p. 262). In recognizing the multitude of factors that are constantly negotiated to create one’s identity, the theory has been broadened “to incorporate a critical perspective and to include attention to contextual structures, ideologies, and status hierarchies” (Collier, 2009, p. 261), and often centers on “interview texts focusing on the forms through which cultural-identity positions and intercultural relationships are negotiated, [and] the role of privilege in the outcomes of discourse” (p. 261), aligning well with this study.

Crystallized Selves. Adding to conceptions of identity, Tracy and Trethewey introduce the concept of the crystallized self in response to what they refer to as the real-self fake-self dichotomy, which occurs when “marginalized members often label their organizational selves as ‘fake’ and/or compartmentalize public and private selves, while more privileged employees are encouraged to align their seemingly ‘real’ selves with the preferred or idealized organizational self” (2003, p. 2). Rather than solely confronting the issue of marginalized members feeling like they are unable to be true to themselves by perpetuating the dichotomy, Tracy and Trethewey explain that “the crystallized self is multi-dimensional... crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which it is constructed and constrained” (2003, pp. 20-21). By acknowledging both the complex ever-changing nature of identity and the oneness of identity, Tracy and Trethewey emphasize the importance of viewing identity as a crystallized self—a fluid and multifaceted amalgamation of elements rather than totally separate influences.

Who is Allowed a Sense of Self?

To be aware of one’s place in a society or group is important to successfully developing an identity, a concept which I will refer to as a sense of self. Yakalı-Çamoğlu describes the self

as “narratively constructed by way of thinking about ourselves autobiographically and by way of telling our life stories to others” (2018, p. 79). And to stress the significance of a sense of self, Muhammadi explains that “it is important to note that it is sense of self that gives us sense of existing” (2016, para. 8).

Sense of Self and Gender. Acknowledging the relationship between developing a sense of self and one’s gender is necessary for many reasons, and one of the foundational reasons, as Griffin explains, is that “historically and currently, women and men often have different access to channels and positions of power” (2009b, p. 396). Due to this reality, Tangdall (2017) explains that women used to form their identity in relation to men, since “a woman never truly has an identity that is her own because first she is given her father’s name, then she takes her husband’s name, leaving no room to establish autonomy” (p. 53). In response to those who may choose to not abide by such expectations, Griffin notes the consequences, saying that “when individuals violate gendered expectations for communication, they exist in a double-bind state” (2009a, p. 392). Likewise, Tangdall addresses the inverse, noting those who abide by the ascriptions can “be rewarded for maintaining the status quo” (2017, p. 70), and discussing in particular those who “have access to power that a patriarchal society gives to women who meet certain esthetic standards” (p. 70).

Yakalı-Çamoğlu, in their study of the implications of gendered movies on boys and girls, found that “the representations of femininity and masculinity in popular culture present us with two distinct sets of stereotypical character traits. The first set belongs to women’s cultural forms, which attribute certain themes and traits to femininity and masculinity; and the second set is for men’s cultural forms, which present totally distinct sets of traits” (2018, p. 77). This fact begins to explore how people of different genders are able to reconcile the differing norms they have

been exposed to in order to construct their identities. Yakalı-Çamoğlu notes that “popular culture segregates the two sexes from childhood onwards, through positioning them in two different sets of narratives and giving them narrative identity with two sets of expectations” (2018, p. 77), though it can be assumed that more factors than just popular culture introduce and enforce these gendered standards forced upon children.

Privileged Sense of Self. While it has been established in the aforementioned research that men and women are exposed to different expectations for their identity, the broader claim that “gender matters and gender does not exist in isolation; it is always present in a state of interconnection with other subject and identity positions” (Griffin, 2009b, p. 396) can be applied to more groups than just the binary. Vivienne (2017) discusses the privilege that cisgender women have over trans women and non-binary individuals, noting in particular TERFs, or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists, who use their relative privilege to deny others a place in the community. Also discussed are the privileges invoked in individuals such as Miley Cyrus or Ruby Rose, both famous, attractive people who identify as gender fluid but use feminine pronouns and pass in their everyday lives. While they may be in marginalized groups due to their gender identity and sex, Vivienne emphasizes that privilege has emerged as a worthwhile frame to assess identity with, since another commonly used frame, empowerment, “connotes the giving of power and authority in a way that remains complicated for both cisgender people and gender-diverse folk residing in a patriarchal system” (2017, pp. 137-138).

Policing of Sense of Self. Another important question is that of how one’s sense of self is enforced—or policed—by themselves or other factors. Tangdall explains that “most gender performances are not intentional acts but reiterations of hegemonic practices” (2017, p. 50), while Stapleton stresses the roles of taboos in policing how identities are expressed. Stapleton

(2003) notes this in relation to gender, saying that since “taboos play an important role in maintaining the status quo of a society, women have traditionally been more fully subject to their effects than have men” (p. 22), and emphasizing that while someone of any gender will have consequences for disrupting the accepted norms, “such consequences will be intensified by the speakers [sic] positioning within the prevailing (gender) hierarchy” (p. 22).

Non-Masculine as Defined by Masculine

Referring back to Collier’s (2009) discussion of avowal and ascription, it is established that our identity consists not only of what we think of ourselves, but rather “is a relational matter. It depends upon the view of our role and position in the eyes of other members of the group” (Muhammadi, 2016, para. 1). Yakalı-Çamoğlu extends this concept of self-definition to the concept of gender, noting that “masculine and feminine identities are effects of power within a patriarchal discourse, and that we come to be who we are as men and women as we negotiate power with the opposite sex and with the discourse itself as a whole” (2018, p. 81). Griffin (2009a) brings the ideas into even clearer focus, explaining that “language is man-made—that it has been controlled by men for centuries and reflects a bias toward masculine styles of communication as well as masculine ideologies” (p. 391), introducing the question of how well a non-masculine person can define themselves in masculine terms.

Stapleton, whose study explored the attitudes of individuals towards cursing, remarks that “particularly for women in this group, identity is an ongoing and contested site of definition, with respondents appropriating certain expletives, while rejecting (and explicitly resisting) the use of others. Hence, they may be seen as engaged in an ongoing negotiation of ‘femininity’” (2003, p. 32). Tangdall confers, their study exploring the male-created industry of fashion magazines, about which they comment that “artifacts of popular culture, such as fashion

magazines, instruct women on normative behavior and encourage them to enter into discourse communities” (2017, p. 47). The work of both of the researchers explains some of the ways in which non-masculine individuals have their identities formed through masculine frameworks and expectations.

Language as a Vehicle of the Patriarchy

Since the project is centered upon gleaming individuals’ identities through narratives, another concept necessary to discuss is that of the importance of language and an “attention to rhetoric’s constitutive capabilities” (Dow, 2016, p. 60). Muhammadi emphasizes the relationship between identity and language, saying that “an individual plays different roles in society. His or her identity keeps changing according to context in time and space. This identity shift is mainly managed by language” (2016, para. 1).

Gender and Language. Tangdall echoes this and brings the concept of gender into the conversation, noting that people are identified with a certain gender through their “language, actions and interactions” (2017, p. 50). This references back to Griffin’s (2009a) comment that language was made by and for men, meaning that women and other non-masculine people “must rewrite and reclaim language so that it reflects a woman-centered ideology rather than one grounded in male perspectives and politics” (p. 391). One example of this, as mentioned before, is the rules of language that Stapleton (2003) explores in their assessment of individuals’ attitudes toward cursing, where women have been deterred from the practice through cultural processes and expectations.

Tangdall also discusses “women’s language” (2017, p. 51), which includes vocabulary, situations, and intonational changes that is used both by women in describing their own realities, and as a way for others to describe women, and is “used to systemically deny women access to

power” (p. 51). This distinct “language” used in matters regarding women is another example of current language fulfilling its purpose of being created by and for men.

Feminist Rhetorical Criticism. To begin to address these realities of language and gender, an important lens to use is that of Feminist Rhetorical Criticism, as discussed by Griffin (2009b). With the goal to “advance and improve the symbolic and material positions of women” (Griffin, 2009b, p. 396), and the “assumption that, historically and currently, women and men often have different access to channels and positions of power” (p. 396), the approach seems meaningful in relation to this research project. Other important elements of the theory include the belief that “gender matters and gender does not exist in isolation; it is always present in a state of interconnection and with other subject and identity positions” (Griffin, 2009b, p. 396) and that “texts are chosen not for their familiarity, but instead for their ability to shed light on the approaches and styles of communication used by and about women” (p. 396).

Rationale

As evidenced throughout the literature review, there is plenty of previous research on the elements that comprise this research project: identity, gender, language, and the various intersections of the three. But there is not research on the specific areas explored, such as the relationships between the three in relation to college students in particular, or through the theories of crystallized selves, Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory and Feminist Rhetorical Criticism. Additionally, since each person’s amalgamated identity is unique, the findings encountered are guaranteed to be different than if anyone were to carry out an otherwise identical study. There is also fairly little use of narrative analysis used to explore these intersections, while this study uses the methods to glean rich and reflective information unique from that possible in studies based strictly in quantitative or participant observation.

Drawing on existing literature and in hopes of contributing insights into the intersections of identity, gender, and language, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. How does the language used in narrative describe and engage with gender?
2. How do narratives about gender depict privilege and/or oppression?

Methods

Throughout all stages of research—both in data collection and analysis—I attempted to exercise self-reflexivity to the best of my ability, stressing the importance of the researcher being aware of where they fall in the context of their research. This was especially imperative because my participant pool was primarily comprised of individuals within my social circle, meaning that I had to be wary of projecting other information onto what they shared in their interview.

Relatedly, I also acknowledge that it is impossible to be a completely neutral observer and researcher in ethnographic research, as I view the data through my own circumstances and knowledge. This was especially important to be conscious of when analyzing the interviews as I was careful to not project my own experiences or beliefs onto the narratives of others.

In order to be transparent about the views that I carry into my research, it is necessary that I discuss my assumptions about the ways in which our world functions. I believe that our reality is socially created, but that that does not negate the reality of it, especially for marginalized or silenced groups. What is important to remember about reality being socially created is that it is not static, but constantly evolving and changing through the actions and beliefs of people. Because of this, I also believe that listening to people and their experiences and conceptions of reality and themselves is the way to conceptualize how our world functions and how the people within it position themselves. Necessarily, I feel that the methods employed in listening to and honoring these narratives aligned with these beliefs.

History and Case

Gender has always been a marker that humans identify themselves and others by in social groups or larger communities, but discussions of gender have only become normalized in academic discourse—and, to a large extent, popular discourse—in recent decades. Further nuances, such as the acknowledged existence of trans and trans-non-binary people in contemporary western society, have come even later. Despite this late start to being recognized academically, the Human Rights Campaign (2020) explains that “although the word ‘transgender’ and our modern definition of it only came into use in the late 20th century, people who would fit under this definition have existed in every culture throughout recorded history.” Other recent movements that have invoked broad discussions of gendered experiences include the #MeToo movement, which “was founded in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls... find pathways to healing” (me too, 2018), but rose to an international conversation in the late 2010s. The discussions started in this movement addressed—and continue to address—the multitude of ways that (predominantly) women are exposed to situations of sexual violence.

In regard to the importance of studies such as this, the Human Rights Campaign (2020), in a study of LGBTQ youth in 2012, found that “about 10 percent of respondents identified themselves either as ‘transgender’ or as ‘other gender,’” showing the need for more research to be done that is inclusive of the gender-diverse community. Seeing as the institution that many participants are members of is affiliated with a traditionally conservative religion, gaining more insight into how its students view their gender and related identity will be worthwhile in itself.

The study is centered around ten college students—though one graduated two months before they were interviewed—most of whom attend a mid-sized private university with strong

religious ties, though only around third of the student body identifies as members of the same religion. The acceptance rate makes the school somewhat selective, and the cost of the tuition and fees may lead to other barriers to prospective students, though the institution provides merit- and need-based scholarships and grants to supplement loans. One participant attends a large public university in the Pacific Northwest with a fairly selective acceptance rate, and another attended an also fairly selective large public university on the East Coast.

Data Collection

The data collected during this study came in the form of narratives from ten college students through semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected within my social group, which is beneficial in a study such as this because the participant already had rapport with me, making discussing personal matters and feelings less daunting. This selection also guaranteed a level of diversity in gender identity and expression. The semi-structured interviews permitted a general list of questions to be asked of all participants while also allowing conversation to follow any interesting and relevant topics that may have arisen. The majority of the interviews were over a video call, the audio of which was recorded with permission of the participants. The interviews ranged from 15 to 40 minutes, coming to a total of over 250 minutes of interviews, all of which were transcribed by hand for a total of 57 pages of interviews.

Data Analysis

All interviews underwent iterative grounded analysis, which consists of three phases: primary coding (sometimes called first cycle coding), second cycle coding, and advanced data analysis. This process allowed for effective comprehension and thematization of the data in order to develop well-supported conclusions about the gender and privilege within narratives. Primary coding consisted of reading through all of the interview transcriptions and noting codes which,

during secondary cycle coding, I grouped into categories before finally arranging the categories into the four themes explored in the findings section.

The data analysis was approached through a critical lens, which assumes that there are power structures underlying all aspects of life, thus influencing how has access to power and whose voices are appreciated in society. I also employed Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory and Feminist Rhetorical Criticism, the former of which stresses the contextual element of identities, while the latter requires that texts—such as the narratives produced through this study—be read in a way that is cognizant of the fact that women (and other non-masculine people) have different access to power and language than men do.

Findings

Gender identity and expression are elements of the self that everyone engages with constantly, whether they are always conscious of doing so or not. But despite this constant negotiation, there is much that is still unknown about gender in every context. To explore gender within the realm of communication further, I posed two research questions:

1. How does the language used in narrative describe and engage with gender?
2. How do narratives about gender depict privilege and/or oppression?

In response to these questions, this section will discuss four themes: forming gender, modes of enforcing gender, performing gender, and reconstructing gender.

“Growing up there wasn’t an alternative”: Forming Gender

Although gender is a social construct, everyone engages with it—whether that be by accepting the various gendered roles and expectations ascribed to them or rejecting them. Because of this, it is clear that there is a period when individuals are introduced to their ascribed gender; or, in other words, a period in which their gender is formed. Through the interviews

conducted, three primary ways that participants' genders were developed emerged: through the environment they were raised in, through physical aspects that signified their gender—such as their bodies and clothes, and through activities that they and those around them either engaged in or did not engage in depending on their gender.

The Gendered Environment. All participants discussed ways in which the environment they had grown up in impacted the formation of their gender identity. Many discussed the gendered environment in broad terms, explaining that they grew up in traditional homes with strict gender norms—as displayed through roles or gendered toys, clothes, and activities—or mentioning the messages they had received about gender. Zoe, a junior studying marketing, noted that the messages she received about Mexican women in her Utah community had formed how she saw herself as a woman of color—many of which she has since had to confront and reevaluate. Other participants cited their family's approach to gender roles, such as Kathy, a junior studying communication and political science, who commented on the expectations her parents had for her and her siblings: "Growing up, when we would do chores and stuff, I noticed that my sister and I would be asked and expected to do more than my brother." Brenda, a gender, sexuality and women's studies major who graduated from their university at the end of the last term, mirrored Kathy's sentiment as they reflected on the fact that in their early childhood people did not treat them the same as their brothers, thus differentiating between their ascribed genders.

But the most common context in which the environment was mentioned was in response to the question, "When did you first become aware of your gender?"—a purposefully open-ended prompt. Pierre, a junior studying finance, said that he could not remember if there was a certain point where he knew he was a man, explaining that "growing up, there wasn't an alternative... there wasn't a scenario in which it would have been fine for me to see myself as a

girl,” and elaborating further—with a physical embodiment element—that he “lived in an environment where if you have a penis, you are a man.”

Physical Representations of Gender. Taking Pierre’s environment as an example, it is clear that physical expressions of gender are pivotal to the formation of one’s gender identity. This is not limited to one’s body, but can also extend to other physical elements, such as their clothes or haircut. Elena, a sophomore studying English and philosophy, noted that the first time she recognized her gender was when she and her brother would run around naked as children, since she could see the physical differences between their bodies. Likewise, Kathy recalled a moment from kindergarten as the moment when she was first fully cognizant of her gender:

We had these little paper things to fill out and you had to pick a girl or a boy outline, and the girl one was wearing a dress and had really long hair [and] I just didn’t look like that so I picked the boy one and my teacher was like, “But you’re a girl! You don’t want that one, do you?” And I was like, “No, but I dress that way. I am a girl, but I wore basketball shorts today.”

This memory engages many different elements of gender identity as Kathy navigated having someone—notably an adult in a position of power—tell her that her chosen depiction of her gender identity was incorrect, inferring that there was a right and wrong way for a girl to present herself. Zoe also mentioned ways in which she was gendered through her outward appearance as she explained, “my parents gendered me when I was really young—since I was a baby... I had pink clothes and I always had long hair that was always done very neatly in braids or in a ponytail.” Anne, a senior studying education and English, concurred, remembering that when she was younger, she “literally only wore dresses and skirts.”

But these physicalities do not only determine the formative stage of one’s gender identity,

instead enduring throughout one's life. Both Anne and Jason, a junior studying to become a nurse, commented on their height as being something that people noticed first about them, as both differed from the gendered expectations. Anne, who described herself as a "taller than average woman," did not have much to say about her height other than that it surprised some people, but Jason, who is five-foot-one, said that he felt his height sometimes changed others' perceptions of him.

Shanelle, a senior studying organizational communication, said that he thinks about his gender almost every day because of the hyper-masculinity he has encountered throughout his life and its subsequent implications. Through reflection on these repercussions in recent years, he found that because he had been measuring his body against the hyper-masculine bodies of other men, he had set a standard that he could not reach: "Even if I tried, I would always fail—[so it was] just a repetitive toxic cycle." Through realizations like these, it is clear that gendered expectations of what bodies and expressions should look like have had negative impacts on participants' views of themselves—both in their formative years and otherwise.

Activities as Gender Performance. Another element that participants described as being especially formative during the formation of their ascribed gender identity was through activities that were either seen as being for girls or for boys. While most of these involved sports, Lauren, a junior nursing student, reflected on when she chose to pick up the drums in fourth grade. Her mom had resisted this choice, asserting that Lauren should pick something else as drums were a "boy instrument." While Lauren ultimately ignored this, competitively playing the drums through high school, she remembers being initially confused about her mom's reasoning. Andy, a junior studying Spanish and psychology, also remembers gender roles being enforced growing up as his mom did most of the household chores and was a stay-at-home mom for most of his

childhood while his dad filled the role of “the main breadwinner.”

But sports were the activity that participants remembered as being the most gendered, as Jason reflected on the fact that while sports teams were not separated by gender when he began playing at a very young age, they were quickly split into boys’ and girls’ teams as they grew older. Zoe reflected on subverting these norms as she played on an otherwise all-boys baseball team in first grade, remembering that many of her teammates would ask, “Why are you here?” and she would have to respond, “Because I want to play baseball!” As these examples illustrate, most participants acknowledged various activities as having a gendered element, exemplifying another way in which their gender identity was formed.

Fear, Labelling, and Shame: Modes of Enforcing Gender

While the formation of gender occurred for most participants in their early childhoods, all discussed ways in which gender norms have been enforced throughout their lives in varying methods and degrees, with members of oppressed genders and gender expressions providing detailed accounts. The first general way that these gendered expectations were engaged with in the narratives was through the cultures of societies, schools, workplaces, and homes, while the second mode of enforcement was through harsher processes of ridicule, fear, and violence against individuals whose gender and/or expression is not appreciated in a patriarchal society. And the final means that gender was enforced was through participants’ monitoring of themselves, making sure they did not cross the boundaries expected of their gender.

Gendered Cultures. The cultures that participants cited as imposing their gender upon them varied in size and context, with one of the most common being in the workplace. Within these workspaces, gender was engaged with in various ways, one of which being Anne’s experience with a blatant gender pay gap. She discussed her time at a common retail store during

high school, remembering that after having worked there for an entire summer, a new boy—who was younger than her—got the same job as her. One day, she recalled, she casually asked what rate he was being paid, only to find out that his starting rate—despite being hired with lower availability, due to school being in session—was higher than the rate she had been making. When she brought up the subject of a raise to her boss, Anne said her “boss freaked out and told me we were not allowed to discuss wages and that it was a fireable offense,” before telling Anne that she would not be getting a raise. During her interview, Anne reflected that the store was “definitely a boys’ club in terms of the managers at the store,” citing another woman having worked there for four years and only getting a twenty-five-cent raise which came to a wage lower than the starting rate of the teenage boy.

Kathy also recalled gendered experiences at her high school job at a prominent supermarket, saying that it had been common for teenage girls to get a job at the store for a couple years before moving on to other pursuits, but that there were also many older men who had worked there for a long time. She reflected on the dynamic between the men and girls as that the former “would always be trying to... I don’t want to say prey on [the girls]... but sometimes it kind of felt like that.” By having older men in positions of relative power define a younger woman’s time in the workplace, Kathy’s experience provides another example of a culture that enforces gender norms—allowing men to harass women purely for existing in the same space.

Other participants discussed broader societal culture in relation to their gender. When reflecting on whether she thought her gender impacts her everyday life, Elena said, “I do feel like what I say is listened to less, or I’m seen as a bitch if I say something outward.” In a more specific context, Shanelle reported feeling like “less of a human being” when in some all-male groups, citing the hyper-masculinity of the other members of the group as to why he feels his

opinions are valued less. In contrast to the peers who made up the groups, Shanelle said, “I identify as a male, but I also really value my femininity.” While elaborating on his belief in the importance of fluidity in regard to gender, Shanelle also stated that “our Western culture wants you to check a box or put a title on whatever that may be, but that really isn’t how life works,” exemplifying another way in which culture attempts to force gender norms on individuals.

Gendering Through Ridicule, Fear, and Violence. For participants with a more feminine gender expression, another constant source of gendered policing was through the ridicule, fear, and violence directed at them throughout their lives—overwhelmingly from masculine men. Many women cited being catcalled by men on the street, with many saying the comments began when they were in middle school, and others remembered being involuntarily grabbed by men in public at concerts or on buses—all ways in which the men were trying to use their power against those of a different gender. In her interview, Lauren recounted two defining memories from college, both very gendered experiences. The first was when she and her friends went out on Halloween their first year of college and met an older male student who wanted to take them to a party because he had already been turned away since “you had to bring girls to get into the party.” When their group showed up at the house, Lauren said, “they looked at us and then still turned him away, which she guesses was because she and her friends had not been “Halloween-dressed sexy.” While she said that she can look back on the incident and laugh, she did note that prior to be turned away she “didn’t worry about looking hot enough or something, [but] it kind of changed after that, a little bit.”

Lauren also discussed a sexual assault that had been committed against her during her first year of college, revealing some the ways the assault had impacted her:

[The assault] was hard for me particularly because I’ve always been a very sexual

person... and it took a long time for me to get back to how comfortable I was with sex after that. It felt like something had been kind of taken away from me... it changed how I felt about myself a lot and it changed how I felt about having sex or anything for a while—even in safe, comfortable, consensual situations sometimes it would just snap and I wouldn't be able to do it.

In a similar occurrence, Kathy addressed an abusive relationship she had been in with an older man, saying of her time with the man, “it made me feel like I was kind of living a double life for a long time.” In both of these instances, men (who are responsible for the vast majority of sexual assaults and abuse) took advantage of young women, altering how they were able to view themselves and sometimes the healthy relationships they tried to form afterward.

While women are most commonly on the receiving end of gendered ridicule and violence, others are also impacted, as evidenced in the dynamic of one of Shanelle's groups for a class, comprised of all men. Shanelle remembered that at the beginning of one of their meetings, the other members of the group all wanted to “bro shake”—a style of casual handshake between men which consists of a series of hand movements that Shanelle was largely unaccustomed to. In his interview, Shanelle said, “they wouldn't let us start the meeting unless I did the bro shake with all of them, and so it ended up being like six or eight minutes of me failing and everyone seeing that,” reflecting further that the exchange had made him “feel so shitty inside.” By refusing to begin the meeting until Shanelle had performed this masculine rite, his group members were seemingly attempting to enforce Shanelle's gender through ridicule.

Self-Policing of Gender. While others were commonly the mode through which participants reported their gender being enforced, there were also moments in their interviews in which the participants themselves seemed to police their gendered experiences. Kathy, upon

being asked what she thought her defining characteristics were, answered that she thought people noticed her smile, immediately following up with, “not to be all self-indulging”—a quick note to ensure her feminine modesty was in check. Similarly, when asked what she thought her biggest accomplishment in college was, Zoe said, “I don’t like to talk about that I’m good at my job, but I feel like I am good at my job,” effectively monitoring how vocal she could be about her successes. Later in her interview, Kathy discussed how she was actively working on being outwardly proud of her performance in school, saying,

I always kind of downplay [being good at school] and I’ve gotten better at actually being like, “Yeah, I’m doing well in school and that’s no small feat”... I didn’t like it when I felt like people would be like, “I’m so accomplished,” and I didn’t want to seem that way—like I was bragging.

As women are consistently told not to brag about their achievements, Zoe and Kathy’s relationship with their successes is not surprising.

Another way in which Zoe seemed to police her gendered (or sexed) experience was in her response to the question of whether or not she thought that her gender impacts her everyday life, to which she responded, “I mean definitely once a month—not to be disgusting—but having a period.” By calling Zoe her period, which is a very gendered process, disgusting, it seems that the rhetoric of society has impacted the ways in which women view their body and its practices.

“He saw me as someone who needs to give to someone else to feel whole”: Performing Gender

Despite the problematic nature of forcing gender upon an individual, as discussed in the previous theme, participants also described other ways in which they engage with their gender—a collection that falls under the broad theme of performing gender. The first element of performing gender that will be elaborated upon is in relation to the gender roles that participants

reported filling or feeling pressured to fill. The second, in a related vein, is summarized as “the plight of the feminine”—discussing the ways in which the women interviewed portrayed their existence in a patriarchal society. The third section delves into the theme of dissonance in identities—a feeling shared by many participants, and the final section engages the various ways that those interviewed acknowledged their various privileges in relation to their gender.

Gender Roles. Participants demonstrated the prevalence of gender roles in varying ways. Exemplifying an embracement of traditional gender roles, Jason, in describing his goals for the future, discussed his plans to fulfill the roles ascribed to his gender, saying, “I have a goal of becoming a husband and father [pause] I want to be a provider for my family.” Others critiqued the ways that gender roles had defined their experiences, such as Lauren’s realization that after she and her friends were turned away from the party, she developed “a weird sense of having to be hot” in college. This was echoed by Zoe, who talked about “the norms that come with being a college girl—a lot of it is centered around dating and beauty and clothing.” Zoe also discussed the intersectionality of gender and race as she reflected on her introduction to the college dating scene: “as a woman of color... I remember just feeling like, ‘Oh, I’m not white and that’s why a lot of people don’t want to date me, because I’m not the typical blonde, blue-eyed [woman].” This feeling of not being able to fulfill what is touted as the “ideal” woman in our Euro-centric society highlights some of the issues with the expectations we push on groups.

Emphasizing another element of the presence of gender roles, Anne talked about her experience with gender roles both in the context of her work as a student teacher and otherwise:

I’ve been socialized in a way that I don’t even realize that that’s what I’m doing, but then I look at the men around me and none of them act the way I do in terms of the nurturing support I offer students, or the deep emotional friendships I have, or my ability to feel my

emotions—like, to actually cry.

This sentiment touches on the gender roles ascribed to both women and men as Anne differentiates herself from the men in her life, noting that she thinks that, as a woman, she is able to better develop relationships and has a healthier dynamic with her emotions.

The Plight of the Feminine. While Anne cited some positive aspects of being in touch with the feminine qualities ascribed to women, many other women interviewed commented on the ways in which they felt their gender put them at a disadvantage. Lauren described, throughout her schooling and work experience, that “it feels like as a woman you always have to work harder just to be considered baseline acceptable work—you can’t just be good, you have to be the best to be taken seriously.” Kathy echoed this feeling in her interview, saying that at her work she felt as though she “had to work harder to prove myself to be equal and not just viewed as an object,” adding another layer—objectification—to her experiences in the workplace.

In a similar theme of underestimating women, Lauren discussed how she felt as though she had been viewed in her previous relationship:

[My ex-boyfriend] saw me as someone who has an endless amount of giving and doesn’t need much in return... I think he also saw me as someone who needs to give to someone else to feel whole and someone who wouldn’t stand up for themselves.

This perception is highly gendered, as women have been historically expected to sacrifice their own wants and needs to accommodate what the men in their life want.

Another area in which the women interviewed differed from their counterparts was in relation to their plans to eventually have a family. Two women discussed the issue as something that would need to be in negotiation with their career plans, something which none of the men interviewed discussed. Elena’s thoughts on the topic were in relation to what type of job she

would pick—specifically in relation to the money she could expect to make, noting that if she were to have children, she would feel compelled to enter a higher-paying job rather than following more artistic pursuits. Anne, on the other hand, described a different situation: “I would also like to get married and have a family... but I really want to further my education and have a career, so I don’t know how those two things are going to line up.” By acknowledging that she was already predicting difficulties in reconciling her home life with her professional life, Anne engaged a common dilemma of the “modern” woman—a juggling act not typically asked of men in the same way.

Dissonance in Identities. A feeling of disconnect between elements of their identities was common among participants—and brought upon them by many different factors. One example of this was in the case of Kathy’s previous relationship: the demands of being in an abusive relationship with an older man while also juggling the fact that many of her friends and family members were not aware of the relationship made her feel as though she was living a “double life,” disconnected from both herself and her support network.

Anne described a different feeling of dissonance—one that she says she created herself. As a self-described organized individual, when asked what she wished people would notice about her more, she said, “I think I have a really well-crafted persona with my acquaintances, but I think with people I know more I wish that they realized that I don’t always have it all together... that that’s a façade.” By creating and executing this persona that was meant to be professional and presentable, Anne also built a wall of sorts that stopped those close to her from recognizing that she was not always as composed and on-top-of-it as her “façade” made it seem.

Brenda also presented an interesting account of when they feel as though they are living a split life. When asked whether or not they think about their gender on a daily basis, Brenda said,

I am aware that most people do not view me as the gender that I view myself, and that kind of creates a dissonance. I feel like every time I see someone on the street and they look at me, I kind of—it's kind of in the back of my head because I know that they are not viewing me the same way that I view myself, so I would say that makes me aware of it pretty often.

This knowledge that the general population does not see them as they are is something that is entirely gendered, and something that obviously weighs heavily on Brenda—adding another layer to their experience with their gender.

Acknowledged Privilege. All of the men interviewed—and most of the women—acknowledged the privilege they feel they have in regard to their gender. Zoe said that she is in a position of privilege as a cisgendered woman, and, when asked whether she thought her gender impacted her everyday life, Elena said, “I would say it does, but in a lesser way than a lot of other women experience.” Thus, both women noted that while they are in an oppressed position within the patriarchal society, they are also able to evaluate the other intersecting factors that made their lives easier than others who also identify as women.

Pierre described his privilege by saying, “I enjoy significant advantage in life from being a man... there's not any politics describing what a man can do with his body, you know? Like there's no debate about that.” Similarly, Andy noted that “being a male grants you all these other privileges that, like, women don't have, that non-binary people don't have,” before acknowledging another layer to his privilege: that he does not always process instances of sexism in the moment. Shanelle said that he had not fully grasped his male privilege until he came to college, saying that after he became aware, he realized, “because I am a male, I constantly need to be working against that privilege that I have, and using my voice for others.” Through all

these recognitions, it became clear that the participants were able to generally appreciate the positions of relative privilege they hold within society.

“Always evolving, always changing, always growing with you”: Reconstructing Gender

The final theme found across the interviews is that of participants reconstructing their relationship with their gender, from embracing parts of themselves that they had previously tamped down to finding empowerment in their identity or expression. This period of redefinition was most commonly during participants’ time in college, as is discussed in the first section. The second describes ways in which participants reported going against what is expected of individuals of their gender, and the final section discusses the empowerment that both women and non-women participants found in their femininity.

College as a Space to Grow into Oneself. Every person interviewed reported feeling that their time in college had allowed them to grow into themselves to some extent—whether that be finding academic success, meaningful relationships, or becoming more at peace with themselves. Andy described his time in college as transformational in many aspects, saying, “the way I dress, the way I talk to people, how I act, my interests and stuff—that’s all part of how I’ve grown into myself.” Jason described his growth from high school to college in terms of his beliefs, reflecting that, “[in high school] I was more of a pushover with my values and how I lived and just who I let know what is important to me, but I think it’s pretty obvious what is important to me now,” also discussing the activities he participates in—being active in his church, hunting, and martial arts—as affirming those values. Pierre also compared himself to who he was in high school, saying, “I see myself now as where I would have wanted to be five years ago... where sixteen-year-old me would have wanted twenty-one-year-old me to be,” after noting that he felt his confidence was no longer purely on the surface.

In her interview, Lauren said, “I feel like I grew into myself... it’s not all the way gone, but not caring as much about what people think is something that I am really proud of,” a sentiment echoed by Shanelle as he said, “[I’ve realized] that I don’t need to put a label on something for other people.” Growth like this illustrates the ways in which participants have been able to work against the enforcement efforts of those cultures and people around them.

Brenda further emphasized the importance of the environment in growing into oneself as they said,

The school that I transferred from was historically an all-women’s college and so it was super queer-friendly and there were no cis men there, and so just being in a space where being not cis was so normal and accepted, I don’t know, showed me that I could also do that and gave me the courage to come out to my friends.

To sum up their experience, Brenda said, “college is when I really was able to solidify my personal gender identity,” providing another example of the important formative time and space that college provides to young adults as they analyze who they are and who they strive to be.

Going Against Gendered Expectations. In figuring out who they wanted to be, some participants discussed ways in which they consciously went against the expectations ascribed to their gender. Andy described doing so in high school, saying,

I went to an all-boys school and I had very high expectations but I quickly realized that a lot of the guys at school I did not get along with, just because... they all kind of seemed to have structure and that obviously was gender performance and stuff, but I kind of quickly was like, “I don’t want to be a dumb jock who is mean and sexist.”

While of course being mean and sexist are not explicitly expected of men, Andy rejected what was the norm of men in the environment he existed in, instead deciding to abide by his values.

Zoe also discussed the ways in which she subverted what was expected of young women in her community, saying,

I mean, my reference point for how you're supposed to be when you're twenty-one is being married and having a baby, and so for me it's actually been me building what it actually means to be a twenty-one-year-old... without kids and taking a radically different approach to adulthood than my parents did.

Both of these experiences and those discussed earlier—Lauren insisting to play the drums despite them being a “boy instrument,” Kathy recognizing that women do not have to dress in a certain way to be women, and Shanelle realizing that he can both be a man and embrace his femininity—show ways in which participants went against certain norms expected of them due to their gender.

Redefining and Empowering the Feminine. Finally, many participants—both women and otherwise—critiqued the traditional definition of the feminine and provided new insights. Many women reported that, in recent years, they had found empowerment in their womanhood, an existence which Kathy reflected on when asked what being a woman means to her:

If I would have been asked that question a long time ago I would have thought of certain characteristics and listed them out... but I think being a woman is just an identity... like everyone who identifies as a woman is a woman, that's what makes them a woman.

The sentiment of this inclusive definition was echoed by Shanelle as he discussed what he values the most in his gender identity, saying, “[fluidity] is the most important word to me when I think about gender, identity, everything is just fluidity and I think it's something that is always evolving, always changing, always growing with you.” In embracing this sense of fluidity—whether it be through physical appearance, clothing, hairstyles, or identity—participants

described how they were able to redefine their experience on their own terms, rather than the expectations forced on them by those around them.

Discussion

In this research project, I analyzed the narratives of college students to see how they engaged with gender in their stories, asking the following research questions:

1. How does the language used in narrative describe and engage with gender?
2. How do narratives about gender depict privilege and/or oppression?

One finding of theoretical significance was in participants' described ways of deconstructing or going against what is expected of individuals of their gender. This ability to work against the patriarchal power systems shows that the structures—while underlying all of the narratives—also have the capacity to be malleable rather than unmoving. Another finding of significance is that my research affirms the importance of Tracy and Trethewey's concept of the crystallized self. Finally, practical applications of the research findings include a push for recognizing common humanity as all participants provided nuanced and unique perspectives.

Theoretical Significance

Hope in Malleable Power Structures. My research, while affirming the existence of gendered power systems in the content of participants' narratives, also emphasized the capacity for these systems to be malleable. This became clear as participants discussed the ways in which they have gone against what is expected of their gender—such as Shanelle embracing his femininity—or actively working to reform the power structures—such his desire to “work against” his male privilege. This ties into the discussion around one's sense of self, as engaged by Tangdall in the earlier literature review, as it shows how many participants' perceptions of themselves and their genders have differed than what might have been expected in previous

years. While Tangdall explains that—in a traditional path—“a woman never truly has an identity that is her own because first she is given her father’s name, then she takes her husband’s name, leaving no room to establish autonomy” (2017, p. 53), participants like Elena did not mention getting married at all when asked about her goals for the future. This emphasizes that while most women do not have their own identity in terms of their last name, many are placing more meaning in the other elements of their identity—embracing their academic side, planning for their career, or exploring their gender expression.

As Griffin (2009a) discusses the implications for individuals who choose to go against the gendered expectations imposed upon them and Tangdall notes that individuals who abide by the norms ascribed to their gender can “be rewarded for maintaining the status quo” (2017, p. 70), my study both confirms these assertions and builds upon them. Regarding the double-bind state that those who violate their gender’s norms, Zoe shows that while this is true—her having to taking a new approach to adulthood without many models to follow, while also knowing that she would be unhappy if she were to be a young married mother (which is more common in her community)—she was also excited about the freedom the situation gave her, showing hope for other ambitious individuals who wish to do things differently than what is expected of them. And while many participants cited ways in which their abiding by the status quo let them lead happy lives, some noted that they also want to adapt the status quo—such as Kathy’s inclusive definition of who is a woman.

Affirming the Importance of Crystallized Selves. The research also affirms the importance of viewing individuals as crystallized selves, a multifaceted conceptualization of one’s identity. As Tracy and Trethewey (2003) explain that “crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which it is constructed and constrained” (pp.

20-21), participants described elements of their identity as contextual. Lauren discussing the changes in her sexuality after she was sexually assaulted, shows how while that element of her crystallized self was impacted after a traumatic incident, the incident does not define her entire identity. And when other participants reported feeling as though there was dissonance between elements of their identities, they highlighted the intricacies of one's crystallized self—that certain opposing facets may exist at the same time but have the capacity to evolve to align.

The concept of crystallized selves is also important in that it allows for the complexities of privilege that can be found in narratives about gender. One example of this was Zoe, who, while verbally acknowledging her cisgender privilege, also discussed ways in which being a woman of color has been challenging in a society that is built upon racist power structures and has historically praised white features. Since Zoe is able to describe how she is both privileged in some ways that are gendered while also being oppressed in others, it is clear that the notion of a crystallized self which allows for this duality is imperative.

Practical Significance

The primary piece of practical significance that should be gleaned from this research is an appreciation for the multifaceted nature of others, which hopefully inspires a sense of shared humanity. All of the participants provided detailed and personal accounts of just one aspect of their identity—each engaging with gender in unique and worthy ways. So, although the participants themselves may hold different values or opinions, it is also necessary to not define someone by one element of themselves. Instead, acknowledging that every person is an amalgamation of their various identities and experiences allows for a sense of shared humanity—a sense that can inspire respectful conversation and meaningful change.

Another related practical application of this research is a push for allowing others the

time and space to share their narratives, whether that be in future research or in everyday life. If we consciously choose to honor the stories of others—especially those in historically silenced and marginalized groups—by asking them about their experiences and then giving them the ability to openly share, power structures and realities can be brought to the surface in a way that they may not be through other methods.

Conclusions

Clearly, the data collected during the course of this project was extremely rich and could have been coded and analyzed in many different ways and through many different lenses. Thus, I would encourage more research to be done through narrative analysis as it allows participants to share their stories as they want them to be shared. Research should also continue to be done on the intersections of gender and identity, especially since individuals' attitudes toward their gender seem to be shifting from previous studies, with many participants acknowledging and critiquing the underlying power structures that have previously been taken for granted and others embracing their differences. In a related vein, other research could be conducted to explore attitudes toward fluidity and what implications a fluid conception of gender would have on the existing power structures and cultural dynamics. Finally, a continued dialogue about how privilege and oppression are manifested in individuals' stories is necessary in research not only regarding gender, but other intersections as well.

It is also essential to address the limitations of my study, most of which were due to the covid-19 outbreak, as it narrowed my options for data collection. I had initially planned to utilize the snowball method after my initial interviews with individuals in my social circle (which was meant to assure a degree of gender diversity), but when circumstances were changed, I chose to utilize my social network instead of pursuing outside FaceTime interviews. This medium also

proved limiting in some ways as there were some technical difficulties encountered and I was unable to be as cognizant of non-verbal communication as I would have been if the majority of the interviews could have been conducted in person.

In conclusion, I hope to stress the importance of approaching the intersections of gender, identity, and expression through an understanding of people being crystallized selves. As evidenced in the narratives analyzed in this study, by acknowledging the multifaceted nature of individuals and affirming their unique experiences in relation to their gender, we are supplied with a better comprehension of both them and the power systems that they exist in. Additionally, by engaging with privilege and oppression as expressed in those narratives, we can strengthen these comprehensions even further.

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