

# 2016 Southern Sociological Society Presidential Address: Are Millennials Cracking the Gender Structure?

Social Currents

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/2329496517697145

journals.sagepub.com/home/scu



Barbara J. Risman<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this article, which grew from my presidential address at the 2016 Southern Sociological Society Meetings, I offer a revision of my theoretical argument that we should conceptualize *gender as a social structure*. This revision includes a differentiation between the material and the cultural dimension at each level of the gender structure. I then briefly present some empirical evidence from a study of American Millennials to illustrate the usefulness of the revision. The research presented helps us understand how today's young adults are adapting to, and perhaps changing, the gender structure itself. The data are based on interviews with 116 young adults, age 18 to 30, from the Chicagoland area. The findings suggest that some Millennials are rejecting gender as a binary while others are embracing essentialist ideologies. Most of the sample tell stories that are full of contradictions between their identities, the expectations they face, and their worldviews. I conclude with some implications of the research for both social change and academic research.

## Keywords

sex and gender, theory, children and youth

How far have we come toward ending gender oppression? If you spend any time in the blogosphere, you will find much writing by young people who reject the gender binary, refusing to identify as man or woman, instead opting for newly imagined identities such as genderqueer. Transgender activists are demanding equal rights, and sometimes winning them. At the very end of his term, President Obama signed an Executive Order that requires schools to let students use whatever bathroom matches their gender identity. And yet, President Trump has chosen to void such protections. Even before the 2016 presidential election, progress on transgender rights was controversial. The State of Virginia requires students to use the bathroom of their

assigned sex and sued Obama's federal government for the right to continue to do so. The Supreme Court will hear the case. Gender politics are in the air.

Heated political debates also still exist on how women should break through the glass ceiling. The Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg (2013), urges young women to *Lean In*. In contrast, former Director of Policy Planning for the U.S. State

<sup>1</sup>University of Illinois at Chicago, IL, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Barbara J. Risman, Department of Sociology, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1000 W. Harrison Street, MC-312, Chicago, IL 60607, USA.  
 Email: brisman@uic.edu

Department under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Anne-Marie Slaughter (2015) disagreed and wrote about the *Unfinished Business* of the gender revolution. Slaughter argued that she did *Lean In* and that did not level the playing field between caretakers and those without family responsibilities. Slaughter argued that to solve the problem of gender equality, we must build an infrastructure of care to support our economic sector. From genderqueer youth to the glass ceiling, a President elected despite bragging about groping women, and a woman losing the Presidency despite winning the popular vote. Gender is once again in the news.

The sociological research literature on gender inequality provides evidence of a stalled gender revolution (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; England 2010), or at least a very slow march toward equality. Women outnumber men in college and graduate school, but majors remain sex-segregated and men still dominate top positions in government and industry. Men are doing far more household labor and child care than their fathers' but still far less than their wives. In addition, the increase in single mothers, especially in the working class, means that many fathers are more absent from caregiving than were their own fathers. What we do know is that gender equality in the workplace and in heterosexual relationships is still a utopian goal.

In this article, I offer a revision to my earlier framework for understanding *gender as a social structure*. I have long argued that we should conceptualize gender not simply as an identity but as a stratification system that has implications for the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis. In this article, I respond to the increasing attention directed toward the importance of culture in the discipline of sociology by distinguishing between the material and cultural aspects at each level of gender structure. I then briefly present some qualitative interview data from Millennials to illustrate the usefulness of this revised framework for understanding the gender structure. I ask, are Millennials rejecting the gender structure, or are they simply confused by it? My answer is both/and. The gender structure is full

of cracks, and Millennials are navigating between them. Most of the sample tell stories that are full of contradictions between their identities, the expectations they face, and their worldviews. I conclude with some implications for future research on gender and Millennials, and for the possibilities of social change in a feminist direction.

## Gender as a Social Structure

In previous work, I have conceptualized *gender as a social structure* with social processes that occur at the individual, interactional, and macro levels, and with explicit acknowledgment that each level of analysis is equally important (Risman 1998, 2004; Risman and Davis 2013). Despite common usage in sociological discourse, no definition of the term "structure" is widely shared. I choose to use the word "structure" rather than system or institution or regime to situate gender as core to social organization as politics and economics, where the focus has long been on political and economic structures.

A structural perspective on gender is accurate only if we realize that gender itself is a structure deeply embedded in society, within individuals, in every normative expectation of others, and within institutions and organizations at a macro level. I build on Giddens's (1984) structuration theory with its emphasis on the recursive relationship between social structure and individuals. Social structures shape individuals, but simultaneously, individuals shape the social structure. Following Giddens, I presume the transformative power of human action, with reflexivity and actors' interpretations of their own lives. Connell (1987) also argued that structure constrains action, yet since human beings are reflexive, practice can reject constraints. Action may turn against structure but can never escape it. We must pay attention both to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and to how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure.

A discussion of gender as a social structure does not at all deny individual free choice or agency. We must realize, however, that when

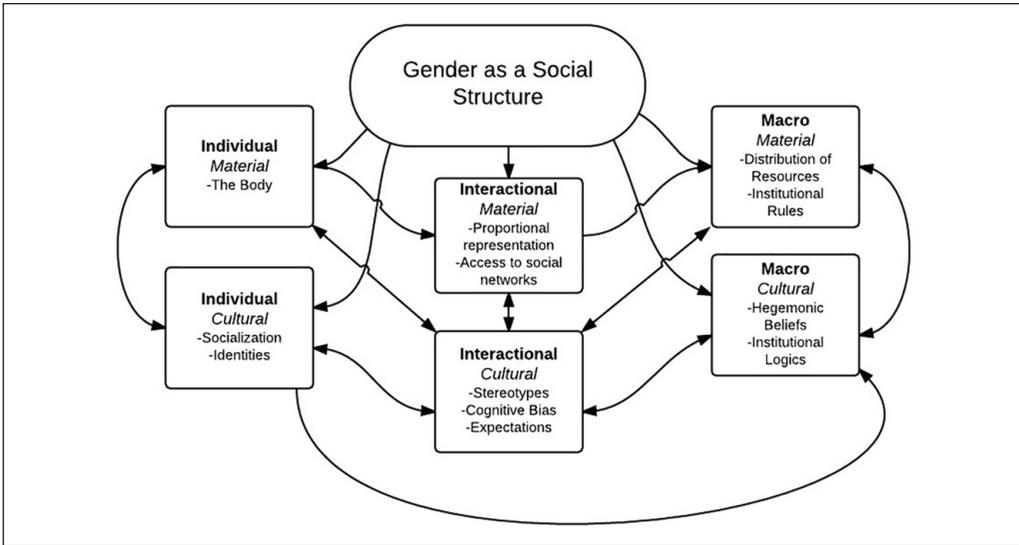
individuals make choices, they are not purely free choices. Individuals are profoundly shaped by the gender structure that exists before they do and into which they are born. But gender structures are in continual flux, as are all social structures, and individuals alone, or in collectivities, do react to and change them. Agency must be conceptualized as broad enough to incorporate both resistance to and reproduction of social life. While attention to pervasive oppressive power is important for feminist thought (Foucault 1978), it is also important to focus on practice theory such as Giddens (1984) to explain the ever-changing social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Human beings reflexively monitor the intended and unintended consequences of their actions, sometimes reifying the structure, and sometimes changing it. We must constantly acknowledge that structure is a social construction both enabling and constraining human action (Giddens 1984; Hays 1998).

My work builds on others who have argued for multilevel theories of gender as sexual stratification which both constrains and enables action (Acker 2006; Butler 2004; Connell 1987; Feree and Hall 1996; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Risman 2004), and interacts with other social inequalities. The gender structure is a dynamic system: when one part changes, it can set off a chain reaction like a game of dominoes. There is a dynamic recursive causality between individual selves, interactional expectations, cultural ideology, and organizational structure. Change one part, and get ready to see that every aspect follows, although not in any predetermined direction or speed. In this framework, I neither deny the power of internalized oppression and gendered selves, nor the import of expectations, cultural logics, and organizational structure. This focus on gender is but one part of a complicated puzzle to understand contemporary inequality among American Millennials, as gender structure interacts with race, sexuality, ethnicity, and other forms of inequality. In this work, I focus on gender with an empirical sample that is predominantly nonwhite, working class, and includes people with a variety of sexual and gender identities. In this way, I provide some

evidence of the applicability of gender structure to those beyond the white middle class that is often the basis of research.

The resurgence of cultural sociology furthers a both/and theory of science by reinserting the importance of meanings into the study of inequality. Swidler's (1986) argument that we conceptualize culture as a tool kit clarifies the importance of culture without defining culture as opposed to structure, but as one important component of it. We have toolboxes of cultural knowledge at our fingertips to help make sense of the world around us. The cultural trend in sociology (Hays 1998; Schippers 2007; Swidler 1986) helps to improve my earlier conceptualizations of *gender as a social structure* by suggesting that we must incorporate a focus on meaning at each level of analysis. At the individual level, culture is internalized into gendered selves. At the interactional expectations, we must study the meanings and stereotypes that each of us experiences in every social encounter. At the macro level, we must pay attention to ideology as a cultural justification for gender inequality. Culture matters and has sometimes been overlooked in structural theories. So too has the materiality of bodies sometimes been overlooked.

At each level of the gender structure, we must identify both cultural processes and material conditions. I differentiate them here simply by referring to culture as ideological processes, meanings given to bodies, interactional expectations, and for the organizational logics faced in daily life. Material conditions include bodies themselves, how those bodies are segregated into social networks, and the physical distribution of socially valued rewards. Only when we pay attention to both culture and material reality can we begin to identify under what conditions and how bodily sex differences become inequality embedded within a gender structure. This model is more a landscape, a framework, than a traditional theory that predicts causality. The picture illustrates possible causal mechanisms but posits only that the gender structure is dynamic, and that when one element changes, others follow. Within this framework, the flexibility remains to hypothesize causality in any direction, with



**Figure 1.** Model of gender as social structure.

empirical research needed to discover the causal directionality in any given context. In the section below, I will briefly discuss how to differentiate between the material and cultural aspects of the gender structure at the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis. Figure 1 summarizes the model.

### *Individual Level of Analysis*

In every society, the *gender structure* organizes how bodies are assigned a sex category from which gender as inequality is built. Bodies have always been used to display gender. To understand *gender as a structure* at the individual level of analysis, we must attend to both biology and bodies and to culture. This is complicated, however, by the research that suggests that social roles and experiences influence hormone levels of adults as well (Freese, Li, and Wade 2003; Perrin and Lee 2007; Rosenblitt et al. 2001). Sociologists used to distinguish between “sex” as about bodies and “gender” as about culture, but bodies are culturally created and gender may also be influenced by biology. The lines are not simply nor cleanly demarcated.

Bourdieu’s (1988) theory of practice, particularly his concept of habitus, is very useful to

help explain the social creation of materiality at the individual level of the gender structure. Young children learn to “walk like a girl” and to “throw like a boy.” The gender structure becomes embedded in children’s bodies. But it is not determinative. The habitus generates the possibility of what actions can be imagined. While some people clearly do reject the consequences of childhood training for their bodies, they cannot rebel outside the boundaries of their habitus, beyond their imagination. With ever more sophisticated medical intervention possible, people can choose to alter the materiality of their lives and use technology to change their bodies in their quest to live the gender of their identity. Whatever the material circumstances of individual lives, as bodies are born and made, the gender structure has defined the possibilities, enabled options, and created constraints.

The gender structure is not only about the materiality of bodies, it also has deep implications for identities, personalities, and gendered selves. As boys and girls become cultural natives, they learn norms about gender and usually internalize selves that naturalize those norms (Bem 1993). Social scientists have long studied gender socialization as a mechanism for how culture becomes internalized. Boys and girls do, at least some of the time, learn to

have a preference for gender-typed play, college majors, and even careers. It is important to understand how identities are constructed through early childhood development with explicit socialization and by modeling. To the extent that women and men choose to do gender-typical behavior across social roles and over the life cycle, we must focus on such individual cultural-level explanations. England (2016) has recently made a powerful argument that sociologists must remember that structural inequality affects outcomes because of external constraints and also because such constraints affect internalized preference and even personality characteristics which then influence individual choices. Gendered selves are the cultural aspect of gender at the individual level. How much gendered selves explain inequality is a vital empirical question. The important lesson from the accumulation of research over the twentieth century is not that social structure is unimportant for individual selves, but that socialization and identity work alone do not explain all of gender stratification. Interesting empirical questions remain as to the stability of gendered selves over time and the importance of the individual level of analysis for gender preferences.

### *Interactional Level of Analysis*

The interactional level also involves *material* conditions as well as the *cultural* aspects of doing gender, determining gender, and accountability to stereotypes. In a given social situation, the relative proportions of others in one's sex category can change the dynamics of expectations, with tokens facing unique challenges, and individuals who shatter homogeneous settings facing negative consequences (Gherardi and Poggio 2007; Kanter 1977). The relative proportion of the sex category in any setting is a way to conceptualize the material consequences of the interactional level of analysis. Gender-segregated space, whether bathrooms or locker rooms, illustrates the importance of this aspect of the gender structure; some humans are alike enough to share private spaces and others are not. Same-sex networks embody the material aspect of

interactions, advantaging those groups already in power and disadvantaging others. The patterned inequality by sex to access positions of power has long disadvantaged women. Such disruption leads to patterned inequality in access to resources, power, and privilege. Most of the action at the interactional level of analysis, however, occurs at the cultural level of gender stereotypes and cognitive bias.

The expectations from others that guide every moment of life are gendered. The *cultural* stereotypes that each of us face in every social encounter are different based on our presumed gender. As West and Zimmerman (1987) first suggested, we "do gender" to meet the interactional expectations of those around us. If we do not meet others' expectations for our behavior, we are judged harshly and so face strong social norms to "do gender." Individuals who do not "do gender" as expected, or do not "do gender" in concordance with their ascribed sex disrupt interaction by violating taken-for-granted assumptions. While simply being a numerical token matters, how being a token matters depends on the meaning of maleness and femaleness. Male tokens often ride a glass elevator (if they are white) although not necessarily if they are black (Wingfield 2009; Zimmer 1988). Those who reject the sex assigned at birth and identify as another gender experience first hand the need to learn to "do gender" and for transmen, the benefits of being male (Schilt 2010). What is clear is that the manifestations of gender display are culturally specific and "doing gender" needs to be learned by anyone claiming the gender woman or the gender man. Much feminist sociology has focused on "doing gender," and the different varieties of masculinities and femininities that have evolved as ways to "do gender" vary by race, ethnicity, class, and nationality.

Ridgeway and her colleagues (Ridgeway 1991, 2001, 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004) show just how powerfully the processes by which status expectations are attached to gender (and race) categories become cross-situational. In a sexist and racist society, women and all persons of color are expected to contribute less to task performances than are white men, unless they have some externally validated source of prestige

or authority. Women are expected to be more empathetic and nurturing, men to be more efficacious and agentic. Such status expectations are one of the engines that re-create inequality even in novel situations where there is no other reason to expect male or white privilege to emerge. Status expectations create a cognitive bias toward privileging men with agency and expecting women to nurture (Ridgeway 2011).

Cognitive bias of this sort helps to explain the reproduction of gender inequality in everyday life. The most enduring stereotypes around gender are those on the axes of agency for men and nurturance for women. We are held accountable to gendered norms, whether we choose to meet those expectations or reject them, expectations exist. Westbrook and Schilt (2014) suggested that the act of other's determining gender is as powerful as individuals doing it, the other half of the interactional process. Practicing gender depends on preestablished understandings and cultural meanings. Practicing gender both reflects and re-creates gendered aspects of institutions. Correll (2004) showed that cognitive stereotypes about gender can even affect women's choices because they assess their own abilities within these cultural stereotypes.

### *Macro Level of Analysis*

The gender structure also organizes every type of organization, institution, and the cultural logics that accompany them. In many societies, the *material* reality is a legal system that presumes women and men have distinct rights and responsibilities, and those who exist outside a gender binary have few rights, even to exist legally. In societies whose legal systems are based in traditional religious doctrine, male privilege and sex-based rights are built into the very fabric of social control. Even in Western democratic societies, with mostly gender-neutral laws, some nations still allow for different retirement ages for women and men, thus building gender into legislative bureaucracy. In the United States, private insurance companies are still allowed to charge male and female customers different

prices. Nearly all countries have myriad laws that discriminate against people whose gender does not coincide with the sex they were labeled at birth. In all societies, material resource allocation and organizational power still rest, predominantly, in the hands of elite men. Feminists have long been concerned with the material inequality at the macro level of analysis.

Gender is symbolically embedded in organizational workplace cultures as well (Gherardi 1995). As Acker (1990) and Martin (2004) have shown, economic organizations embed gendered meanings in the definition of jobs and positions. Any organization that presumes valued workers are available fifty weeks a year, at least forty hours a week, for decades without interruption presumes that such workers have no practical or moral responsibility for caregiving. The industrial and postindustrial economic structure presumes workers have wives to provide caregiving or do not need wives because they have no caregiving responsibilities. Even as laws and formal organizational regulations shift toward gender neutrality, cultural logic often remains, hiding male privilege in gender-neutral formal laws that sustain men's access to power (Acker 1990, 2006; Williams 2011). Gendered cultural logics exist as ideational processes in workplaces, families, and religious institutions. We must study changing beliefs to understand historical changes in politics and policy (Béland 2005).

Ideational processes are an important part of the macro level of the *gender structure*. Recent empirical research shows the power of cultural meanings attached to gender. Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann (2012) found that the effects of motherhood on women's earnings vary cross-nationally depending on cultural ideology. If cultural support exists for mother's paid labor, then parental leaves and public child care facilities increase women's earnings. But if cultural ideology privileges the male breadwinners/female homemaker normative family, then parental leave and public child care have no effect, or even detrimental effects, on women's income. Ideologies at the macro level of the gender structure are not

fixed, nor are they immutable, but they do have significant impact on equality. We must link feminist concerns for cultural meaning with institutional analyses of material inequality (O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999) for a full understanding at the macro level of the *gender structure* (Adams and Padamsee 2001).

To understand how gender stratification is produced and reproduced, and sometimes decreased, from generation to generation, we need to understand the breadth and depth of the power of gender as a social structure. Thus, we should not to ask *whether* gender is best conceptualized as an individual trait on the interactional level or as embedded in organizational rules and cultural beliefs. But rather, we need to build a full picture of the complexity of gender as a structure. We need to use empirical research to study the alternative strength of individual selves versus cultural expectations versus organizational design, as explanations for particular questions, or moments in time, or dependent variables. We learn more by approaching every empirical question with complexity, a concern for each level of analysis—the individual, the interactional and macro, and the recursive relationships between them. We must be concerned with the recursive relationship between cultural and material processes at each level and across levels of the gender structure. As Hays's (1994) argued, we need to understand that structure not only limits us but also helps us create a sense of self, gives us tools for action, and therefore makes agency—and social change that might result from it—possible.

I now illustrate this framework's applicability by using it to analyze today's Millennials' lives. When do today's young adults "do gender" merely by habit, an enactment of taken for granted cultural norms, and when we do they consciously "do gender," with intent, rebellion, or even with irony. If young people refuse to do gender as we now know it, can they reject the binary itself, or are they simply doing gender differently, forging alternative masculinities and femininities? Can we identify different reactions to the cultural and material aspects of gender at each level in the ways Millennials navigate the gender structure they have inherited?

## Research Design

In 2013, my research team completed in-depth interviews with a nonrepresentative sample of 116 young people in the Chicagoland area. All the respondents were between 18 and 30 years of age, all came of age at the start of the twenty-first century, a cohort known as the Millennials. We recruited students from introductory sociology courses. We also targeted spaces where we might find young people who would make the sample gender diverse, including those self-consciously rejecting gender binaries. Our recruitment included lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) centers in universities across Chicagoland, and as far as Indiana and DeKalb, Illinois. We also used a snowball method where we had student interviewers follow leads in their own social networks and communities, and included a few interviews with people who lived as far away as California if they happened to be visiting locally. While most of the sample who were critical of a gender binary describe themselves as queer or genderqueer, others used language such as "between the binary," butch, or neither man nor woman. We had six transgender respondents as well. Nearly all individuals in our sample were single and childless. These Millennials are all in a new developmental stage that psychologists have labeled "emerging adulthood" as the transition from adolescence to adulthood now often takes a decade (Arnett 2014).

Seventy-two percent of our sample identified as heterosexual: 57 women, 26 men. We had 11 people who identified as gay: two lesbians, four gay men, three female genderqueer, one transman, and one transwoman. Twenty-two respondents provided us with a series of other sexual identities, including bisexual, bicurious, queer, pansexual, other, and refuse to be labeled.

As Table 1 indicates, we had a very racially and ethnically diverse sample. Many were immigrants, children of immigrants, and first-generation college students. We have slightly less than a third male respondents. Genderqueer respondents who claimed a queer gender always reported their sex as the one ascribed at

**Table 1.** Sample Demographics by Race and Sex ( $N = 116$ ).

	White	Black	Asian	Latino/a	Middle Eastern	Mixed	Total
Female	33 (43.4%)	7 (9.2%)	17 (22.4%)	13 (17.2%)	4 (5.3%)	2 (2.6%)	76 (100%)
Male	13 (38.2%)	3 (8.8%)	8 (23.5%)	9 (26.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.9%)	34 (100%)
Trans	4 (66.7%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (16.7%)	6 (100%)

birth and so are included in the tally as male<sup>1</sup> or female sex category. We also had six transgender respondents, who did not identify by sex category assigned at birth. Our sample is atypical by design: we actively recruited individuals who consciously rejected some aspects of the gender structure, including some who totally reject gender as a binary. Our final sample was mostly, but not entirely, college students or recent graduates, although most were from working-class backgrounds with parents who were not college educated.

Each respondent chose where he or she wanted to be interviewed. The most typical place was either in the sociology department at the university or a coffee shop. There were also interviews at respondents' apartments and at university LGBT centers. Interviews lasted from slightly less than an hour to more than three hours. Interviewers included myself, other sociology faculty, graduate students, and some senior sociology majors. This led to a wide range of interviewing interactional styles, and some inconsistency in probing techniques and transcription quality. To deal with these issues, we had ongoing interview training and weekly meetings to talk about interviews that are completed. In addition, one of the faculty investigators read at least one early transcript from every interviewer and provided in-depth feedback to ensure quality control for subsequent interviews. The diversity of interviewers adds reliability, however, because these interviews could not have been shaped by a bias that any single interviewer might bring to the project. In addition, a major strength of our technique, face-to-face, semi structured interviews, is that, although they all were asked a common core of questions, the interviewers allowed for conversational flexibility so that respondents are able to focus on matters central to them.

We used a traditional life history narrative interview in which we asked questions about their experiences across different life contexts, from school to romantic relationships to career goals. We then moved to a gender module where the questions were explicitly designed to allow us to explore gender at the individual level of analysis, at the interactional level, and at the macro level of both their experiences of institutional rules and regulations, and cultural beliefs. We asked about their own lives, experiences, and beliefs. We also included three prompts: a short article about a Swedish preschool that had banned gendered pronouns, a vignette we wrote about a gender nonconforming young woman's struggles in a public bathroom, and a magazine ad involving a boy with painted fingernails which had actually caused a controversy. A full interview schedule is available upon request (and also available in Risman forthcoming). All interviews were transcribed and loaded into one hermeneutic unit for analysis within the qualitative analysis computer-assisted program Atlas.ti. A theoretical coding scheme designed to analyze the gender structure guided coding of the data. The coding scheme closely followed the gender structure model so that responses were coded by the level of analysis. The coding is available upon request (and also available in Risman forthcoming).

## Findings

A major finding of this research is that most of the Millennials in this sample have complex and inconsistent answers about their experiences in the gender structure. While most of the females assigned as girls at birth in this sample do not reject the category woman, they vary widely in how much they conform to

gender norms, and the degree to which they rebel against them. These Millennials vary tremendously in how they understand and position themselves in reference to the gender structure. I found four different groups in relationship to the *gender as a social structure*: the *true believers*, the *innovators*, the *straddlers*, and the *rebels*. I present each here and differentiate the material and cultural aspects of how they deal with the gender structure at the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis. These categories are only ideal types, designed to help impose some order on complicated life stories. Perhaps the most clear way to conceptualize this typology is about the degree of consistency in their responses about the self, expectations of others, worldviews, and understanding of institutional constraints. The *true believers* are the most consistent supporters of the gender structure and the status quo between women and men. The *innovators* and *rebels* are both consistent in their critique of the gender structure. The *rebels* go further than the *innovators* because they disregard the material constraints of gender at the individual level, as well as the cultural ones. The *rebels* want to dismantle the gender binary itself or at least decouple it entirely from biological bodies. The primary trait of *straddlers* is their inconsistency; when you read their interviews, it is often hard to believe that the transcript represents one person's story because of the incongruity between one section of the narrative from the next.

Due to the sampling strategy used, these findings are not generalizable to all Millennials, or even to college-educated young adults who grew up in working-class families. In this sample, we had 25 percent *true believers*, 41 percent *straddlers*, 18 percent *innovators*, and 15 percent *rebels*. The analyses enhance our theoretical understanding of the cultural component of gender as a structure and illustrate the diversity of strategies Millennials take as they navigate the gender structure. While no generally representative sample exists with measures for each level of the gender structure, we do know that immigrants and children of immigrants are overrepresented in this sample, as are those with traditionalist religious beliefs.

One reason for the uniqueness of our sample is that it was drawn largely from the University of Illinois at Chicago, an urban campus with a diverse student body, including many immigrants. In addition, my hypothesis is that *rebels* are also overrepresented, and that was by design, to assure a gender diverse sample. While there may be fewer *rebels* in the population than this sample, their existence, and demands for everything from all gender bathrooms to gender affirmation surgery on college campuses suggests that they are influencing our society even if their numbers are small. I present the data below for each group using the framework suggested in my model, differentiating individual from interactional from macro level of analysis. I also differentiate between the material and cultural dimensions of each level when appropriate. I begin each section with a short introduction to one respondent who typifies characteristics of the group to be discussed.

### *True Believers in Gender Inequality*

Let me introduce Chad. He is an African American heterosexual male, raised as a Lutheran. His interests are stereotypically masculine pursuits, including sports and hanging out with male buddies. Chad had been a member of the "Gentlemen of Distinction" club in high school. He described it as a group that "acted as gentlemen . . . [and] showed our gentleness personalities to the women . . . You know, we would do things like pass out roses, carry books for the young ladies and stuff." While growing up, Chad's parents tried to instill traditional gender norms. His mother wanted him to learn how to treat a woman as a lady, in addition to being financially successful. His dad wanted him to learn how to protect himself. These values are still very important to him and he told us that he discusses with his friends how to treat women better. Chad believes that masculinity is something passed down from other men. Chad believes that there are immutable differences between men and women. He explains, "I sternly believe in a male, you know, being a strong presence and not overly

emotional or overly—I'm not fond of a male having female traits, or a female having too strong of male traits." At times, Chad seems to endorse the idea that men are superior to women because they are physically stronger. In fact, throughout the interview, he tries his best to distant himself from anything not strongly coded as masculine. Despite this, he does not want to be seen as prejudiced against people who do not conform to gender rules. He told us about knowing a girl who looked masculine in the seventh grade, and how he treated her like a boy because that is how he thought she wanted to be treated. Like other *true believers*, he did not want to be seen as imposing his view on others.

As Chad's story shows, the hallmark of *true believers* is the remarkable consistency in their interviews. They were raised to be traditional men and women and they become so. They experience gendered expectations but do not feel pressured to comply because they want to do so. They have internalized traditional masculinity or femininity. They hold ideological beliefs that naturalize essential differences between the sexes. Their worldviews match their practice and their internalized identities. For these *true believers*, there is smooth gender sailing, at least sailing without waves crashing between selves, expectations, and beliefs, although everyone in the sample reported discomfort with fitting their bodies into idealized gendered packages.

At the individual level, *true believers* have internalized gendered selves. Culture at the individual level is internalized into the self, as these Millennials become traditionally gendered natives. Parents socialized girls to be respectful, modest, and domestic, and they try hard to be so. Their parents and religions also require them to be straight, and all claim a heterosexual identity. The young men were taught to be tough, emotionally repressed, and skilled at masculine tasks such as home and car repair, and so they are. While some of the women occasionally chafe at the greater freedoms of their brothers, few complain seriously or try to change the rules their parents enforce. Few deviate enough from gender rules to have any stories of peers policing

their behavior. These young people also work hard to sculpt and present their bodies in masculine or feminine packages; this is how gender manifests itself materially at the individual level. This packaging of the self as gendered is not easy; their stories are full of angst about being too heavy or too skinny, too short, or too hairy; and all the standards are very different for women and men.

At the interactional level, the *true believers* are far more likely than any others to choose sex-segregated activities within their families and for their social lives. At the interactional level, the materiality of bodies can be seen physically in the segregated networks in which they are embedded. In that way, their material experiences of everyday life are more gendered than for others in the sample. The interactional cultural expectations they faced in their personal lives are far more traditional than those reported by any other respondents. The women have far more stories to tell than the men about explicit gender socialization, having faced more restrictive expectations on a daily basis, usually legitimated by religious doctrine. They not only face constant gendered expectations from family and friends but also expected others, at least in their own social networks, to behave in similar ways. They experience the cultural force of gender themselves, and they also impose it on others.

At the macro level, their worldviews, the cultural aspect of the gender structure, legitimate gendered lives and male privilege. For women, religion is usually the basis of their beliefs about gender. Men more often rely on biological essentialism for their beliefs in sex differences, although they too were usually raised in literalist religious households. These *true believers* are the only respondents who talked about institutionalized rules and organizational policies that differentiate by sex. These formal rules are one aspect of a material inequality that provides privileges to men that are unavailable to women. But they did not criticize such actual material drivers of gender inequality. Neither women nor men critique religious policies that subordinate women, or expect differential obligations from girls and boys, or husbands and wives. And yet, no one

argued that women's sole role should be motherhood, or that women should not work for pay. Even traditional ideology now includes women's labor force participation, especially in traditionally female-dominated professions.

We cannot know definitively where their worldviews came from, but we do know that the parents of these young women and men raised them within literalist faith traditions and were mostly believers themselves. We can trace the respondents' stories from their parent's cultural logics and their religious organizations' rules and regulations (the macro level) to the expectations they faced during parental gender socialization (the interactional level). In this developmental moment, emerging into adulthood, it appears that their parents were successful at raising children who share their beliefs. And yet, both men and women hold concurrent twenty-first-century-American individual ideologies of free choice, individualism, and upward mobility. No woman or man suggested college-educated women should identify being a mother as a primary career goal. Of course, some women may indeed become full-time mothers when juggling child rearing with paid labor becomes a reality in their lives. Still, not long ago, traditional women and men believed children needed a mother at home full-time and a married woman should plan a life devoted to her family. These young people, while holding close to the gender structure they inherited, are also adapting it because they accept the reality that most women today work for a living. The gender structure is dynamic as even *true believers* hold competing cultural logics and by doing so, both support and begin to change the contours of a gendered worldview. While *true believers* may modify the world, they do so far less than many others in this research as the discussion below of the *innovators* shows.

### ***Gender Innovators: Feminist Futures Envisioned***

Let me introduce Lucy Holmes. Lucy is a 21-year-old heterosexual white woman. She was raised a Catholic and is now an atheist. Lucy's parents enforced strict rules. They did

not allow their children to date or wear revealing clothes. Her parents insisted she attend religious affiliated schools where the boys and girls being treated very differently. Lucy claims that she broke every single rule from childhood through adolescence as she is "really independent" and tries not to rely on anyone but herself for anything. Lucy desires to be free to do anything a man can. She explains that she never wanted to be an all out tomboy but rather a girl who does "guy stuff." She believes that restricting children to certain behaviors or activities based on gender lowers their self-esteem. She has always broken gender norms, refuses to follow any expectations she might face because she is female, and she would like to live in a world without gender distinctions.

Like Lucy, most of these *innovators*, both women and men, had experienced some gender norms as personally oppressive. Personal experience helped to solidify ideologies consistently critical of the gender structure. Every *innovator* was critical of any rule that differentiated boys and girls. Many of the women had grown up in liberal homes where they were encouraged to be all they could be, and remembered—correctly or not—childhoods mostly free from gendered constraints. It is the young men who remembered strong gender policing as children. All of the *innovators* intended to raise their own children without gendered restrictions. They were critical of restrictive gender socialization whether they had experienced it personally or not. Some were vocal radicals, others quietly resistant, but all were opposed to the gender structure that required different lives for women and men. They wanted to undo gender, so that being a man or woman was not confined by gendered expectations.

At the individual level, the men and women *innovators* tell somewhat different stories about who they are and want to be. Both sexes talk about participating in stereotypical male and female typical activities and are comfortable mixing and matching stereotypically masculine and feminine personality traits. But here the cultural internalization of gender differs for women and men. The women are very proud to integrate masculinity and femininity, and feel

as if they are better people for doing so. This is true for the men as well. And yet, the men are also hesitant to proudly claim their masculine side. They are acutely aware that traditional masculinity is often oppressive to women and do not want to replicate that so they brag less about their masculinity than the women do. At the cultural level of internalization of gendered norms, these *innovators* claim to have pushed beyond gendered boundaries. But at the material level of their bodies, they still present themselves willingly as women and men. As with most of the other respondents, in every group, the *innovators* talked a great deal about how their bodies are not quite attractive enough. While these narratives were not explicitly linked to gender, the standards by which they were judging their bodies were entirely gendered. They did not reject the embodiment of gender, nor did they question gendered standards for measuring their own attractiveness.

The interactional expectations during childhood were experienced quite differently for the women and men. Despite most of the female *innovators* having remembered childhood free from oppressive gender socialization, or perhaps because of that, many had been mistaken for boys routinely during childhood. Most of the girls had been left free to present their bodies in whatever felt comfortable during childhood. Puberty changed all that, as they were strongly encouraged to look more like “ladies” and over time most did so. Here the cultural and material aspects of the interactional level are tightly linked for women, as the cultural expectations were very much about the presentational possibilities of the material body. The men remembered far more oppressive childhoods. At the level of cultural norms, they had been fiercely policed for any behavior strictly beyond traditional boyhood activities by peers and family. Such sanctions against gender non-conformity could not be distinguished, by the men themselves, or by me when analyzing their stories, from sanctions against presumed homosexuality. Even the slightest gender non-conformity was understood by those around them to be an indicator of being gay, from wanting to take a ballet class to joining a volleyball team. This was true for straight and gay

men, but the shaming was reported as far more painful by the gay men, as they felt they were being punished for being who they really were. The straight men found it far easier to ignore the policing, and some even developed an ironic attitude and so began to exaggerate their gender-bending or identifying as feminists. The gender expectations for male *innovators* were far more narrow than for female ones, and these cultural expectations also limited how they could present their bodies, their material selves.

By this developmental stage, all *innovators* had rebelled against sanctions for gender non-conformity and had sought out supportive peer groups, including feminist organizations, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) centers on college campuses, gay neighborhoods in urban centers, and carefully chosen partners, friends, and online communities. All these *innovators* have rebelled against the internalization of cultural femininity and masculinity into their definition of self, and strive for integrative personalities beyond gender binaries while still accepting gender differences in self-presentation of their bodies (e.g., the material aspect of interactions) without reflection.

At the macro level, these *innovators* rejected the cultural worldview that men and women should be different and so also rejected the legitimacy of rules or regulations that create inequality in a real material sense between the sexes. They believed that women should have equal opportunity in the labor force, and that men had the responsibility to co-parent their own children, and not to leave nurturing to mothers. But they had yet to experience much formal gender discrimination. To these respondents, school had seemed meritocratic. Women competed quite well with the men in their classes. At this point in their lives, most were too early in their career to identify any official rules or unofficial policies that they felt oppressed women, or caretakers, although they most certainly could identify sexist cultural beliefs and media portrayals.

Millennials all grew up during the ongoing gender revolution. The *innovators* took advantage of this historical moment. They had Internet

access from early adolescence onward—some do not even remember the times before Internet became available and many spoke about discovering ideas and feminist learning communities online. Many told about discovering feminist bloggers. Others learned about the social construction of gender in college classrooms and tell how profoundly that affected them. Such cultural ideas helped initiate and/or legitimate innovative behavior as they rejected gendered expectations. The feminist-inspired cultural changes already in the air during their lives helped to make rebellion easier. All shared the vision of a world where being labeled a male or female at birth did not at all shape future possibilities. All expected to help change the world, or at least the expectations related to gender, simply by being who they are. They wanted to embody the change that they hope to see. All shared a cultural worldview antagonistic to the traditional gender structure. These *innovators* do not reject their sex, just the belief that sex should matter for how they live their lives. This is very much the same message the second wave of feminism has been preaching for decades but is now the air these Millennials breathe. These young people are evidence that, at least for some, feminism has been mainstreamed. The feminist context is also the taken-for-granted reality of the *rebels* but they take a different tack.

### *Rebel Critique: Divorce Bodies from Gender or Reject Gender?*

Let me introduce Clover Johnson. Clover is a 23-year-old white female. Clover was raised with strict religious guidelines. Clover talks about breaking gendered norms from early in her life. She was never a girly girl in childhood, always more of a tomboy. When she was in fifth grade, she and a few girl friends were denied the ability to try out for the football team. They organized a petition, seeking the right for girls to play on the male football team. They did not gather enough signatures to change the rules but this petition drive itself clearly shows Clover's rebellious spirit already in evidence in elementary school. Clover was the first girl to go through puberty in her class and she hated her early physical

maturation, breasts that made her look like a woman before any of the other girls in her class. She particularly hated the attention from boys and the jealousy masking as dislike from the other girls. She repeatedly tried to hide her body by dressing like a boy and wearing loose-fitting clothing. Many of the other students would make fun of her presentation of self, calling her either a boy or a dyke. This continued throughout middle school. By high school, she started to dress more feminine and started to wear "girlier" clothing and growing her hair longer. But then when she left high school and started working, she chopped her long hair off, shaved part of her head, and dyed the rest of her hair blue. She switches her appearance from feminine to masculine and back to feminine with much aplomb and with little current opposition from her friends, coworkers, and, by now, even her family. In college, she has spearheaded a movement to install all gender bathrooms on her campus. Clover has strong opinions about the gender structure. She is totally dedicated to removing any rules, expectations, and beliefs that constrain people into one or the other category. She believes in eradicating the attachment of gendered expectations to social roles. And she refuses to be pigeonholed into one gender category or the other although she acknowledges that her sex is female.

All the *rebels* shared Clover's commitment to a society where being labeled a male or female at birth does not require any particular set of behaviors, as did the *innovators*. But the *rebels* go further. They also wanted a society where being labeled a male or female at birth does not necessitate any particular way to present one's body to the world or to identify with a particular gender. They did not want to have to do gender in accordance with biological sex. This is a worldview totally antagonistic to the traditional gender structure. Some totally opposed gender binaries, at least for themselves, and envision a world without gender. Others are perfectly comfortable with gendered norms for bodily expression in the abstract; they just want those norms to be divorced from the actual physical sex of the body or at least their body.

At the individual level of analysis, the *rebels* were proud to combine feminine and masculine personality characteristics, although like the male *innovators* they were fearful about adopting any small sliver of hegemonic masculinity that reeks of sexism. *Rebels* talked far more about adopting male-typed activities than female ones, but did report all kinds of activities. They believed that they had overcome having only gendered personality traits associated with their sex. Unlike any other respondents in this research, they rejected the gender structure at the individual level in a very embodied material way. Some female respondents switched their gendered presentations of self, from outfit to outfit, or day to day. Other females identified at birth kept a masculine or butch identity throughout their lifetimes. Still other *rebels* presented themselves primarily in masculine attire but considered themselves androgynous, or between the binary, with identities such as genderqueer. In this view, female bodies wearing men's clothes enacted androgyny, but these androgynous presentations of self were boyish enough to lead to many of them to be mistaken for males. For the *rebels*, the materiality of living in a gendered body, especially in a culture that requires all bodies to be presented in either a feminine or masculine way, felt oppressive. For the transgender respondents in this group, hormones helped to reshape the materiality of their bodies in ways that helped them live their gender identity. The transgender *rebels* did not presume that being female meant they had to present themselves as traditionally feminine, or being male meant they had to hide all evidence of femininity. One transwoman respondent wore combat boots and had tattoos. All the *rebels* rejected the gender binary, including the *rebel* transgender respondents who were not trying to pass inside a gender category, but to break free of the exclusive one they had been labeled at birth.

At the interactional level of analysis, *rebels* face constant *gender policing*, particularly from strangers and in their workplaces. Most of the *rebels* remembered being supported by parents to do any activities they wanted to do as youngsters. With a few notable exceptions,

it was peers and nonfamily members who sanctioned them for gender nonconformity in youth. There were some, though, whose families tried very hard to pressure them toward gender typicality from early childhood to the present. Many *rebels* reported painful interactional skirmishes with teachers, doctors, bosses, as well as peers and family members. The two transwomen were forced to try masculine activities in childhood, and between parental coercion and peer sanctions, both retreated into being introverted, nerdy, and lonely. But none of these *rebels* acquiesce to gender policing about their behaviors. They all stand up for themselves and push the boundaries, with behaviors, personalities, and how they present their bodies. These *rebels* were remarkably efficacious. If they were uncomfortable in their bodies, they changed them. If they were being bullied by peers, they search for new supportive networks, including feminist organizations, LGBT centers on college campuses, and gay neighborhoods in urban centers. They carefully chose partners, friends, and online communities. They hoped to change expectations for others by being themselves. Still, they worry about the future, their ability to be who they want to be and still find and keep jobs, and have their medical choices respected.

At the macro level of analysis, the entire social system, every part of it, the cultural beliefs and material organization of architecture and workplace organizations, presume two and only two genders with no one in the middle. This constantly feels oppressive to the *rebels*. Every single one reported having experienced institutional discrimination. If you reject gender as a binary or the sex on your birth certificate, schools, workplaces, medical systems, clothing stores, and bathrooms all are designed to leave you out. All these *rebels* must navigate a hostile world. Many have an ideological commitment to change the world so that being labeled a male or female at birth does not require any set of behaviors or clothes or ways of being. Some even revel in revolutionary zeal, rebelling against rules, laws, and policies that require them to identify as either/or in a gender binary. Others just want to be

left alone to express gender as they desire, but they too are oppressed by societal policies that require gender be a binary.

Life as a *rebel* was shaped by the feminist and queer cultural products that existed as these Millennials emerged into adulthood. They grew up surrounded by information about gender, particularly from online sources. They learned in cyberspace or college classrooms about competing definitions of gender itself. As they aged, they discovered campus and online communities about gender rebellion, learning language that helped them to envision a world where they could stand between the two genders or cross over the boundary between genders. The very ability to imagine living between the binary existed in the cultural habitus in which they grew to young adulthood. These ideas would not have mattered to them if they had not already felt oppressed by gendered rules.

While all *rebels* hoped to change the expectations of those around them simply by living their lives, some were very politically committed to queering gender so that it has nothing to do with sex of the body. Others want to “undo” gender as a heteronormative expectation and live between the genders or beyond it entirely. Some, however, have few political goals and simply want to be left alone to “do gender” as they see fit. At the individual level, these respondents felt oppressed, and the radical cultural messages that existed at the macro level helped give voice to that oppression, and led to agentic actions that allowed them freedom to navigate their daily lives. As they did so, they helped change the interactional expectations for those around them. While most of the *rebels* were quite sure of themselves, that was not true for the *straddlers*.

### *Straddlers: Ambivalence Is the New Normal*

Let introduce Tony, a first-generation Albanian American heterosexual male. He considers himself a religious Muslim and is engaged to his high school sweetheart. His parents were never very strict about anything, including dating. The men in his family spent their time

together, without the women, hunting, fishing, and enjoying other outdoor activities. The strongest gender policing in Tony’s life comes from his friends. He is sure that his male friends believe that “guys aren’t supposed to have feelings.” He knows this because sometimes he is picked on for being emotional and has learned to hide his feelings to avoid negative judgments by friends. He claims that it is necessary to pretend to have less intense emotions so that he does “not sound feminine” to his friends. Even though Tony remains within gendered stereotypes, he rejects them in principle. He is ideologically against toys being coded by gender. For example, he explains that Easy-Bake ovens are pink to support the gendered expectations that only girls need to learn to cook. He rejects the premise that women should be sole caretakers of families and the only one who cooks. He wishes for a world with far more gender equality than exists. But he does not want to make waves. He tries hard to present himself a traditionally masculine and to hide his sensitive side. Tony straddles the gender structure because at the individual level, he realizes that femininity and masculinity are not polar opposites and he is both. He espouses gender equality as an idea. And yet, he tries hard to meet masculine norms in his day-to-day life, to conform to gender expectations to avoid being hassled by his friends. He goes along to get along with his peers.

Tony illustrates one way to straddle the gender structure, but not all the *straddlers* are alike. The *straddlers* told very different tales about their experience of the gender structure. I call them *straddlers* because they are *true believers* at one level of the gender structure but *innovators* at another; they straddle the individual, interactional, and macro levels of the gender structure. Some of the men remembered parents who want them to grow up to earn a living, but beyond that, find it hard to articulate other expectations about masculinity. They barely remember any gendered rules that differentiated them from their sisters. These young men do not remember being raised to be boys, they simply saw themselves as the generic kids. What a difference a female standpoint makes. Many of the girls remembered strong parental

pressure to become feminine women. Most of the women also told stories of their brother's relative freedom, later curfews, and less supervision. The women told nearly as many stories about being taught how to look good as about learning to behave like a lady. Overall, the women have far more memories of parental constraints and explicit gender socialization than did the men. The transgender respondents in this group had far different memories about childhood from others. The transwoman *straddler* had parents who let her be the quiet loner she wanted to be, and so avoided masculine pursuits entirely. She remembered little coercive gender socialization during childhood. The transmen have far more painful childhood memories, with parents trying to coerce them into both heterosexuality and feminine gender conformity.

While parental gender socialization was remembered far more vividly, and oppressively, by girls and transmen (who were presenting as girls when being socialized), males remembered far more sanctions for gender nonconformity from their peers than do females. Men believed themselves shamed into gendered boxes more by their male peers than by women. These male *straddlers* told painful stories about being teased and ridiculed, especially by other boys, for any slight deviation from masculinity, in dress or behavior. Stories of peer pressure were told with more pain than the memories of parental socialization. I cannot know why, but perhaps peers deliver sanctions with viciousness, while parents try to mold behavior with more warmth even with rewards. The *straddlers* have all experienced strong and ongoing pressure to be gender appropriate. Some have internalized entirely gendered selves, but not all.

*Straddler* women talked far more about their bodies, the material aspect of the gender structure at the individual level, than do the men. They told stories about being pressured to wax eyebrows, paint nails, style hair, and diet. All that body modification work has to happen even before the investment of time and money to shop for a wardrobe. Many of the women enjoyed this process and others enjoyed parts of it and also resent the time, money, and effort required to be feminine. A few resent the work it

takes to do gender entirely. The men did not tell stories about the work it takes to be masculine, although some of them do such work at the gym. Both men and women talk about disliking their bodies. For most men, weight is a problem on both ends: some worry about being too thin, others too fat. Like other women, these *straddler* women never talk about being too thin but worry tremendously about being too fat. But it is not just weight that bothers these young people, it is a whole range of complaints about their bodies. It was a very rare person in this group who felt comfortable in his or her own skin.

What *straddlers* have in common is that there is inconsistency in their responses. That is perhaps the *only* commonality among these *straddlers*: their narratives are contradictory from one moment to the next in the interview. The inconsistency exists both within one level of analysis and between them. For example, a young man told us he only has stereotypically male hobbies and interests and then described his personality as empathetic and people-oriented. A woman told us she adored children and wants a career nurturing them, and soon thereafter informed us that she is aggressive and has engaged in physical fights in the recent past. But that is only the tip of the inconsistency. The women describe being taught to be career focused, independent at the same time expected to be warm, people-oriented, thin, and well-coiffed. The inconsistencies grow to the point of confusion. While *innovators* and *rebels* are proud to combine masculine- and feminine-typed behaviors and personalities as well, this pride is absent among *straddlers*. When looking across answers at the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis, the *straddlers'* answers are very inconsistent but not self-reflective. Some women were proud to say they overcame gender socialization, but then go on to espouse conservative gender ideology. Others talk like feminists but never challenge any gender norm at all. Many have very libertarian views toward gender expression, but hold fast to their own gendered selves and express disdain for those who are gender nonconformists. These respondents sound unsure and confused. But they are, after all, still emerging as adults, and perhaps they are still struggling with

the complicated world around them and still weaving together who they will become as full-fledged adults. Or perhaps, instead, their confusing interviews are better understood as a reflection of the complicated, conflicting gender structure that surrounds us all.

These *straddlers* were mostly raised by parents with traditional gender expectations, although this was remembered far more vividly by women than men. The peer pressure to “do gender” traditionally was strong for both men and women, although peer pressure seemed stronger for the men. All this pressure was somewhat effective with *straddlers* internalizing and expressing gendered selves, but not entirely, as they did reject some aspects of gender socialization. These emerging adults reflect the world around them, a world with a gender revolution still ongoing, with the future still unclear. Their contradictions simply mirror the inconsistencies in twenty-first-century America. The best phrase to sum up the experiences of *straddlers* is confused and still searching. Will these young people pick and choose among gendered expectations, and will the new patterns change the gender structure for the future? How will they reconcile critical views of gender often learned in college classrooms with the identities which their parents helped to shape over two decades of life? Only time will tell.

### Conclusion: From Where to Where?

To summarize the findings, I have identified four groups of Millennials who deal very differently with the gender structure: *true believers*, *innovators*, *rebels*, and *straddlers*. These categories are not personality traits of the individuals involved. Rather we should think of this as a typology of the different strategies young people today use to make sense of the gender structure. The *true believers* do not question gender differences at the individual, interactional, or macro level; they endorse a world where men and women face different expectations. The *innovators* hold feminist attitudes at the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis. The *rebels* are more radical than the *innovators* because they not only reject the cultural meanings associated with the

gender structure, they reject the very existence of gender as related to the body’s sex entirely. Many of them reject the very existence of the gender binary itself. The *straddlers* reflect the inconsistency in the world around them. Their interviews are full of contradictions. We must remember that this is just a moment of developmental time, as young people emerge into adulthood. These Millennials will continue to grow and change as they move into adulthood. We cannot know, now, whether their ambivalence is a developmental stage or simply reflects the ambivalence about gender in society. Given that there was no clear patterns by race and ethnicity and category in this typology, it is hard to draw any intersectional conclusions. One conclusion is clear, and that is the gender structure is front and center in these Millennials’ lives, across race and ethnic boundaries.

Are there ways the Millennials differ from previous generations? This is not longitudinal research and so the only possible way to address the question is to identify new trends that seem to be apparent in these data. In every generation before them, there were surely *true believers*, *innovators*, and *straddlers*. *True believers* have the power of history on their side. Until the twentieth century, women were not considered rational enough to vote; women’s rights as human rights is a very modern concept. Most of the young people in this sample who remain *true believers* in gender difference base their opinions on religious doctrine, although some also offer essentialist biological explanations. *True believers* live the most sex-segregated lives of those in this study, and so the men and women create materially different social networks and hold different cultural expectations by sex. At the macro level, they endorse a traditional worldview where women and men play different roles, particularly in families, and endorse religious organizational policies that materialize the opportunities available by sex.

*Innovators* hold views opposite to the true believers, but just as consistent. They reject gender inequality and do not believe sex differences should matter for social roles. Their beliefs, however, are not so new as to be revolutionary. The innovators embody the beliefs of twentieth-century women’s movement, but take

them for granted rather than see themselves necessarily as part of any feminist agenda. At the individual level, they believe men and women have equal potential and are more similar than different but they do not challenge real material differences between male and female bodies and, while they reject gender stereotypes about their personalities, are comfortable presenting their bodies as masculine and feminine. Beyond that, however, they reject the sex segregation of social roles, and occupations, and the expectations that men and women ought to behave different at home or at work. The innovators reject a worldview, and the institutional policies that support it, that privileges men and creates lives that are differentiated by sex category. The *straddlers* fall somewhere in the middle between the *true believers* and the innovators, somewhat confused.

What seems truly new here, in these data, are the *rebels*, who reject not only the cultural meanings of gendered selves at the individual level but the assumption that sex and gender need be correlated at all. They reject the very material existence of gender at the individual level and privilege identities over bodies. Some rebels change their bodies to fit their identity, others simply change their presentation of self so that being female does not require presenting themselves as women. They choose an identity, and presentational style, between the binary. While there has long been evidence of transgender men and women who identify as the sex opposite of the one to which they were assigned, this in-between the binary identity seems to be a *Millennial* phenomenon. The power of queer theories' call to destroy categories and the feminist writings to move beyond gender are embodied in the everyday lives of today's *rebels*. Even if there are very few *rebels*, and my data shed no light on numbers, the impact of gender fluidity on our culture is impossible to ignore, from the demand to choose pronouns and bathrooms to the political demands for new sex and gender categories on passports and official documents.

These Millennials are living through interesting times. The world has changed a great deal since the second wave of feminism. They grew up in an era with many new opportunities

for girls and yet still many expectations are attached to gender. All are still in that new stage of development called emerging adulthood, struggling with who they want to be. They have been influenced by the gender structure into which they have been born. But as they move into adulthood, their decisions will shape the gender structure they leave behind. If there is one major finding here it is that there is great diversity among today's young people. Future research should try to identify the proportions of Millennials of each type and track them as they negotiate adult lives in our ever-changing world. Today's young adults are diverse across every dimension including their positionality in the gender structure.

These findings highlight the importance of the revisions I have offered in this article for how to conceptualize *gender as a social structure*. Distinguishing between the material and cultural aspects of each level of the gender structure allows us to differentiate the *rebels* from *innovators*. Distinguishing between the material and cultural dimensions at the macro level allows us to understand that even those who reject a gendered worldview that privileges men and masculinity still face the material consequences of gender pay gaps and workplace discrimination. No wonder there are so many *straddlers* in this sample, and perhaps in the world, as contradictions are likely between material and cultural dimensions at the individual, interactional, and macro levels of analyses. It is such contradictions, that Connell (1987) has labeled as cracks in the foundation, that create the opportunity for the gendered ground to shift beneath us. The history of gender as a social structure is history of male dominance with increasing challenges to patriarchy. We can only hope that the changes pioneered by this generation, and those after them, will further crack the foundations of the gender structure, opening up possibilities to live in a world beyond gender as a social structure.

### Author's Note

This article is drawn from my presidential address at the 2016 Southern Sociological Society. The data were collected with the help of a team of colleagues, graduate students at the University of Illinois at

Chicago, and undergraduates at Northern Illinois University.

### Author Contributions

I especially appreciate the contributions of Amy Brainer and Kristen Myers to data collection. In addition, I thank Jesse Holzman, William Scarborough, and Ray Sin for their important contributions as research assistants. Finally, I thank Kristen Myers, Carissa Froyum Roise, and William Scarborough for their willingness to read earlier versions of this article. The time necessary to finish this research project was provided by a sabbatical from the University of Illinois at Chicago. I also thank the 2016-2017 class at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University for their response to my presentation about this research.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The author did receive a Fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University which supported work on this project.

### Note

1. I use the biological sex category here to show the distribution of the respondents who were assigned male and female at birth. I use this language to describe the distribution of the sample because those categories have cultural meaning whether individual people align their gender with sex or not. In fact, genderqueer respondents did not identify as woman or man but did still tell us they were born male or female. Whenever I use "sex" I am referring to the sex ascribed at birth.

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