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Supporting Neutrality and Non-Conformity:

Tensions in How Southern California Mothers Enact Gender-Neutral Parenting Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have demonstrated how parents are important agents of gender socialization for children, often funneling children into gender conformity. Less work has considered how families today challenge traditional gender ideologies in their parenting practices. Using data from 22 in-depth interviews with mothers in Southern California, this study examines how mothers understand and enact strategies of gender-neutral parenting, a collection of parenting strategies that challenge traditional gender norms. This research finds that mothers' gender ideologies and parenting behaviors were in tension, as they simultaneously avoided the label of gender-neutral parenting while enacting aspects of this parenting style. As part of this tension, mothers—motivated by ideas about gender equality and bodily autonomy—socialized their children into gender via two distinct strategies. First, mothers minimized gender differences by treating girls and boys equally and using gender-neutral language. Secondly, mothers supported gender non-conformity by challenging gender roles and supporting children's non-conforming expressions. These findings suggest that mothers challenge traditional gender ideologies in their parenting practices. Because the scope of gender identities and expressions is expanding beyond the binary, it is imperative to understand how parents view the task of gender socialization within a changing world.

Key words: gender, socialization, parenting, gender-neutral, mothers, gender non-conformity

INTRODUCTION

Americans today are grappling with gender in a new way. Gender-related issues are no longer limited to gender equality and women's rights but instead include conversations about non-binary gender identities and the rights of people with these identities. As younger cohorts of U.S. adults are more likely to identify as transgender or gender non-conforming than older cohorts (Lagos 2022), stories centering gender non-conformity, such as transgender bathroom bills (Prichep 2024), pronouns in the classroom (Wehle 2023), and "theybies"—children raised outside the gender binary from birth (Compton 2018)—have become increasingly commonplace in the media. These conversations may parallel the cultural conflict in how gender is conceptualized in the U.S. and its important consequences. On the one hand, approximately 62% of U.S. adults favor anti-discrimination legal protections for trans people, and 44% believe bureaucratic forms and online profiles should have options for gender identity other than "male" or "female" (Parker et al. 2022). On the other hand, President Donald Trump spent his first weeks in office ordering government agencies to eschew "woke gender ideologies" by recognizing only two sexes and reproaching gender-affirming care for transgender and intersex youth (The White House 2025a; 2025b). As of writing, over 700 bills intended to impede trans people's legal access healthcare, education, recognition, and public life are under consideration within the U.S. (Trans Legislation Tracker 2026). Thus, gender construction, ideologies, and socialization are prominent issues for many Americans with important implications for gender non-conforming communities.

Parents are important agents of gender socialization within families, controlling their children's gender presentation during infancy and influencing their children's understanding of gender by modeling gendered behavior, encouraging certain gendered expressions, and upholding gender differences (Kane 2006; Mesman and Groeneveld 2018). Parents can also affirm their child's gender non-conformity, as demonstrated by some parents of transgender or gender non-conforming children (Gray et al. 2016; Meadow 2011; Rahilly 2015). However, less scholarship considers how parents intentionally challenge gender norms. Some parents adopt parenting behaviors that specifically question the gender binary, such as gender-open parenting, which refrains from gender assignment and promotes children's gender exploration (Rahilly 2022). Analyzing gender-neutral parenting, a less studied collection of parenting strategies, can provide insight into how parents make sense of the expanding scope of gender with their children.

This study considers the role of mothers in gender socialization, an important group to study when considering patterns of gendered parenting styles. Mothers continue to engage in more childcare labor than fathers (Calarco et al. 2021), indicating children are highly exposed to their mothers' ideas about gender and gender behaviors. Also, mothers' gender ideologies may particularly shape children's ideas about gender into adulthood (Cunningham 2001), suggesting mothers' engagement in gender socialization imparts lasting understandings of gender. Taken together, mothers are likely meaningfully engaged in their children's socialization into gender with important consequences.

I use in-depth interview data from 22 mothers in the United States to examine the questions: how do mothers conceptualize gender in their parenting and how they understand and enact gender-neutral parenting strategies? This analysis reveals that mothers' gender ideologies

and parenting behaviors are held in tension. Although all mothers enacted aspects of gender-neutral parenting, most avoided the label of doing "gender-neutral parenting." Second, as part of this tension, I find that mothers enacted gender-neutral parenting strategies by minimizing gender differences and supporting gender non-conformity. This research extends our understanding of how gender socialization happens within families, paralleling the current tensions around legitimizing non-conforming gender expressions.

BACKGROUND

Socializing into Gender Norms

Sociological work has long gender socialization, the process of developing beliefs about gender roles and gender identities, and behaviors that conform these gender roles. Gender socialization is a way of "doing gender," an interactive performance that legitimizes assumptions about sex categories and gender roles (West and Zimmerman 1987). Parents are important actors of gender socialization for children (Stacey 2021), whose understandings of gender identity begin to formulate in early childhood (Osgood and Robinson 2017). Parenting behaviors impact children's understanding of gender stereotypes (Halpern and Perry-Jenkins 2016). Because infants cannot access gender performances themselves, parents "give gender" to their children (Meadow 2011), perhaps another iteration of labor parents engage in during their "second shift" (Hochschild 2012). Most literature on gender socialization focuses on how parents acculturate their children into traditional gender ideologies. Parents impose normative gender scripts upon their children such as through modeling gendered behaviors or evaluating others' gendered behavior and expressions in front of their children (Mesman and Groeneveld 2018).

Parents can also intentionally socialize their children into normative ideas about gender. Research has identified this pattern across different parent groups, for different reasons. Different-gender parents might endorse traditional forms of gender expression over gender non-conforming behaviors, particularly in boys, to promote masculinity (Kane 2006). Research boys face more scrutiny for engaging in gender non-conforming behavior than girls do (Khanna and Meadow 2023). Recent work suggests both progressive and conservative gender activists may socialize their children into traditional gender roles and discourage gender non-conforming behavior (Rees and Saguy 2024). Some LGBTQ parents may also socialize their children into gender norms as a protective measure (Logan et al. 2025), suggesting some parents adhere to gender norms in their parenting because they perceive their child may encounter difficulties socially if they do gender non-conforming behaviors. These studies highlight the extent to which commonly, parents deliberately socialize their child into normative gendered expectations.

Importantly, the process of gender socialization may be shaped by other social structures, such as race, ethnicity, and class. Research suggests ethnic background may be associated with how families communicate gendered messages, but that gender stereotypes (in general) are commonly discussed within families, across ethnicity (Gutierrez et al. 2022). For those parenting Black boys in suburban and middle-class upbringings, parenting strategies regarding gender socialization are inherently intertwined with racial socialization (Lewis-McCoy 2017) and racialized class status (Dow 2016) indicating gender socialization likely interacts with other social structures.

Challenging Gender Norms

Parents may challenge conventional ideas about gender in their parenting. Research on white different-gender parents documents how some parents were influenced by second-wave feminism, adopting parenting strategies that emphasized gender equality in the home (Risman and Myers 1997) and providing equal opportunities to girls and boys (Martin 2005). Notably, feminist approaches to parenting often center the predominant feminist viewpoint (a white, middle-class perspective), but feminist parents may have various motivations that go beyond ensuring gender equality.

More recently, motivations to challenge gender norms in parenting have to ideas about gender non-conformity and children's agency in self-expression. This includes responding to a child's gender non-conformity. Some parents understand their transgender or gender non-conforming child as being "born this way" (Meadow 2011; Rahilly 2015). These parents "play along" in certain interactions when their child is misgendered (Rahilly 2015). Reactions to gender non-conformity also may vary by the child's sex assigned at birth: parents more easily accept behaviors that challenge gender stereotypes from daughters than sons (Kane 2006; Rees and Saguy 2024) and offer less opportunities to engage in non-conformity for boys, who they perceive as potentially receiving more backlash for pushing gender boundaries (Logan et al. 2025).

Parents can also proactively challenge gender norms as a part of their parenting strategy. Averett (2016) finds that many LGBTQ parents offer their children a "gender buffet," which supports children's autonomy to define their own gender expression, including providing children with assorted gendered and non-gendered clothing, toys, and extracurriculars that expose them to different gender expressions that may align with their inner gender identity (Averett 2016). Recent work explores conscious efforts by parents to raise their children outside the gender binary from birth, disrupting gender categories entirely. Strategies include using they/them

pronouns for their baby, choosing a gender-neutral name, and dressing the child in a spectrum of gendered and gender-neutral clothing (Rahilly 2022). These parenting practices support children's autonomy in gender expression, allowing children flexibility in defining and expressing their gender as they age (Rahilly 2022). These studies indicate that parents do not universally socialize children in gender-normative ways.

Gender-Neutral Parenting

This research focuses on how mothers understand and enact "gender-neutral parenting." Scholars theorize gender neutrality in three different cultural framings: to describe a practice of de-gendering, engaging in androgyny, or gender inclusivity (Saguy and Williams 2019). First, gender neutrality as de-gendering can be understood as a tactic of undoing gender, making gender irrelevant (Lorber 1994; Risman 2009; Saguy and Williams 2019). Second, gender neutrality as androgyny refers to "gender nonconformity within a binary gender system" (Saguy and Williams 2019, 469) where gender remains relevant, but masculinity and femininity can be engaged simultaneously. Third, gender neutrality as gender inclusivity highlights social practices that expand to include previously excluded social groups, a process of redoing gender (Saguy and Williams 2019; West and Zimmerman 1989). Thus, "gender-neutral" is a term used across social situations to describe distinct processes, from de-gendering baby names to self-presentations that reflect masculinity and femininity, to addressing sex-based discrimination via legal protections (Saguy et al. 2020).

Gender-neutrality is evoked in current parenting strategies. Stemming from second-wave feminist efforts to shift gender socialization—particularly to provide equal opportunities to girls (Martin 2005)—contemporary gender-neutral parenting is "the practice of encouraging children

to…express themselves in ways that are not defined or limited by traditional gender roles and expectations" (Degges-White 2023). This parenting style supports children's autonomy in gender expression and behavior. Gender-neutral parenting strategies challenge traditional ideas about gender, such as not enforcing gender-specific colors, avoiding gendered language, encouraging children to play with peers of any gender, and providing children with both gender-neutral and gendered clothing. Parents doing gender-neutral parenting may also support non-conforming gender identities and behaviors—expressions that fall outside what is typically expected for girls or boys. In all, gender-neutral parenting offers an opportunity to examine how mothers understand their role in socializing their children into gender.

The Current Study

This research uses original data from 22 in-depth interviews with mothers in Southern California. Southern California has a demographically diverse population (U.S. Census Bureau 2025) with heterogeneous experience. This area includes "great cities" of queer urban life (Los Angeles and San Diego) alongside nearby "ordinary cities" (Stone 2018). During this study, the California state legislature considered multiple bills aimed to confirm and expand legal protections for the LGBTQ+ population, including gender-related issues such as: access to all-gender restrooms in public spaces such as schools (signed into law), affirming children's gender identity in child custody and visitation decisions (vetoed), protections for medical providers offering gender-affirming care (signed into law) (Equality California 2026). Southern California regionally includes a diverse population with more state-level legal protections for gender non-conforming people issues than other states—a context that is likely to shape mothers' understanding and experience of gender. This research considers how conceptualizations of gender shape parents' openness to and engagement with gender-neutral parenting practices. I

highlight how mothers—driven by ideas about gender equality and children's autonomy—push the boundaries of gender socialization.

METHODS

To examine how parents understand gender-neutral parenting and challenge gender norms, I draw on in-depth interviews with 22 mothers in Southern California conducted between October 2023 and May 2024. I recruited participants via Facebook parenting groups for their accessibility (McCready 2018a, 2018b). Administrators of the parenting groups posted recruitment fliers after I contacted them directly (as a non-parent, I could not participate in the groups myself). The recruitment called for parents for a conversation about how "parents make choices for their children about gender." This recruitment strategy potentially resulted in a group of parents with a particular interest in discussing gender. Parents 18 years and older, with at least one child middle school aged or younger were eligible for participation. I selected this age group because younger children are subjected to more parental control over gender expression by their parents than older children (Maccoby and Jacklin 1987). Cultural shifts toward inclusion for gender non-conformity, such as schools having gender-neutral bathroom requirements (Mays 2023), mean that younger children may be more exposed to gender non-conformity from the beginning of their school experiences. Although parents of any gender were eligible to participate and I attempted recruiting from gender-inclusive, "Mom" specific," and "Dad" specific online parenting groups, my sample consists of only people who identify as mothers. This sample is likely because more "Mom" specific online parenting groups exist than exclusively "Dad" or gender-inclusive groups, underscoring how mothering is more prominently centered in online parenting spaces compared to fathering (Gibson 2019; Scheibling and Milkie

2023). Thus, this research focuses on mothers' engagement in children's gender socialization. Before interviewing, participants completed a survey to indicate some gendered parenting practices (e.g., did they find out the sex of their child before birth? What kind of clothing do their children typically wear?), though the survey was not used to screen out participants.

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics. During the study, participants lived in Southern California. Twenty of the 22 participants identify as cisgender women, and two identify as non-binary. All participants identify as being a "mother" or "mom", so I use this language throughout this work. Eighteen of the 22 participants identify as heterosexual, two identify as bisexual, one identifies as queer, and one identifies as heteroflexible and demisexual. All but two participants are married or partnered with a man; one is partnered with a woman, and one is unpartnered. Most participants identify as white. However, over half the mothers have non-white, bi-racial or bi-ethnic children. All participants had completed at least some college. Thirteen of the 22 mothers work full-time, four work part-time, and five are stay-at-home mothers. The median household annual income for participants is $205,000. At the time of the interview, mothers had children aged one week old to 22 years old, with the average age of children being 8.1 years old. All but two children identify as cisgender: one identifies as a transgender boy, and one child's gender identity is undefined. The mothers ranged from 18 to 40 years old when their first child was born.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics (N = 22)*

Pseudonyms (Age)	*Gender Identity*	*Sexual Identity*	*Race/Ethnicity*	*Age at First Birth*	*Number of Children*	*Gender of Children (Age in Years)*
Andrea (34)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	32	2	Cis boy (1), Cis boy (newborn)
Autumn (45)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	37	2	Cis boy (7), Cis girl (3)
Becca (42)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	39	2	Cis boy (3), Cis girl (1)
Beth (32)	Woman (she/her)	Heteroflexible, Demisexual	White	28	2	Cis girl (4), Cis girl (2)
Casey (41)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	33*	2	Cis girl (7), Cis girl (7)
Claire (34)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	28	2	Cis girl (6), Cis boy (4)
Dinah (34)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	Black	25	2	Boy (9), Cis girl (2)
Doli (32)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	Native American	28	2	Cis boy (5), Cis boy (2)
Eliza (47)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White/Hispanic	35	2	Cis boy (10), Cis boy (9)
Freya (50)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	40	1	Cis girl (10)
Georgia (34)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	33	1	Cis boy (11 months)
Jaya (45)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	Asian	28	4	Cis girl (17), Cis girl (14), Cis boy (12), Cis boy (9)
Jocelyn (35)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	31	2	Cis boy (4), Cis girl (4)
Kate (33)	Non-binary (they/them)	Bisexual	White	30	1; currently pregnant	Undefined (3)
Misty (39)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	18	3	Cis boy(20), Cis girl (14), Cis boy (5)
Monica (38)	Woman (she/her)	Bisexual	White	28*	8	Cis boy (22), Cis boy (19), Cis boy (18), Cis boy (15), Cis b (15), Cis boy (13), Cis girl (13), Cis girl (8)
Naomi (41)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	33	1	Cis girl (7)
Paige (34)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	32	2	Cis boy (2), Cis boy (9 months)
Remi (40)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	35	2	Cis girl (5), Cis boy(2)
Scarlett (43)	Non-binary (all pronouns)	Queer	White	34^	2	Cis boy(9), Cis boy(8)
Vivienne (48)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	Black	30	2	Cis boy (18), Trans boy (13), Cis boy (13)
Whitney (38)	Woman (she/her)	Heterosexual	White	35	1	Cis boy (2)

*Respondents adopted, rather than birthed, their children at this age.

^Respondent's partner birthed their children.

Note: All identities and characteristics were taken at the time of the interview or in follow-up correspondence.

The sample characteristics skew educated, high-income, and white-identifying. This is likely due to white mothers being more active within and/or in control of online parenting groups, creating hegemonic white spaces (Farquharson 2011, Gibson 2019). However, over half the respondents have non-white, bi-racial, or bi-ethnic children, meaning that many of the white mothers in my sample do not have white-identifying families.

In the interview process, the first six mothers participated in pilot interviews (to refine the interview guide) and were compensated with $25 gift cards; the remaining participants were entered into a drawing for a $25 gift card. The questions used for this analysis were consistent across all interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom, phone call, or in public spaces depending on participant preference. The interview guide included questions about becoming a parent and parenthood, parenting decisions related to gender and gender-neutrality (e.g., choices about their children's names, clothing, toys, and extracurriculars), and their understanding of "gender-neutral parenting."

Interviews lasted 50 to 100 minutes, were recorded with verbal consent, then transcribed verbatim (with names anonymized). I completed detailed summaries after each interview, noting interesting responses and potentially salient ideas. Using ATLAS.ti, I engaged in thematic analysis. I began with an inductive analytic approach, engaging in open coding while reading transcripts to identify emergent themes across participants to use as codes (Charmaz 2006). This approach teases out the story within the data without applying a specific theory (Gibbs 2012). For example, the codes "gender as natural" and "challenge gender roles" emerged inductively from the interviews as a topic discussed by multiple participants. I iteratively identified and applied codes to all interview transcripts. Then, I analyzed each participant's coded transcripts and the collection of quotes for each inductive code, writing analytic memos to process emerging themes and pinpoint the most salient patterns among the data (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). This analytic process generated overarching themes such as "minimizing gender differences" and sub-themes such as "treating boys and girls equally" and "using neutral language," which frame

my findings. In my sample of 22 mothers, the data demonstrate variation across families alongside identifying consistent themes, which indicates data saturation (Roy et al. 2015).

My positionality inevitably shaped the research process. As a cisgender woman, I share identities with most mothers in the study, which likely enabled connections with respondents, particularly about experiences as a woman. I did not disclose my status as a non-parent, or opinions on gender, allowing participants to project their ideologies onto my questions (Connell 2018). Respondents were open about parenting and political stances on gender issues, suggesting that my identity as a non-parent and non-disclosure of my political views did not hinder their comfortability. I considered the possibility of social desirability bias in participant responses, however, because all mothers reported both parenting strategies that supported gender normative behaviors and ones that support gender non-conformity (which I focus on below), it appears they did not limit their narratives to responses they considered most socially desirable. This study was submitted as self-exempt protocol #3611 to the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Irvine on August 05, 2023.

RESULTS

Drawing on interviews with 22 mothers, I examine how mothers conceptualize gender in their parenting practice, understand gender-neutral parenting, and explain their motivation in engaging in gender-neutral parenting strategies (or not). First, I discuss the tensions between mothers' gender conceptualizations and reported parenting practices. Next, I find that in tension with their ideas about gender-neutral parenting, all mothers provided narratives of parenting practices aligned with gender-neutral parenting strategies. I elucidate how mothers engage in minimizing gender differences and supporting children's gender non-conformity.

Mothers' Gender Conceptualizations: Why Not Gender-Neutral Parenting?

Mothers simultaneously held multiple conceptualizations about gender that influenced their parenting: the importance of gender equality, the assumption of gender as natural, and concerns about gender non-conformity. Mothers ranged in their ideas about gender categories. Many considered gender as a binary identity that stems from binary sex categories. A few mothers had understandings of gender as fluid, wide-ranging, and socially constructed expressions. These ideologies are evident when mothers explained why they challenged or adhered to gender norms in their parenting.

Most mothers (16 of 22) were familiar with gender-neutral parenting to some extent, though their definitions of it varied. Most commonly, mothers described gender-neutral parenting as including not enforcing gender-specific colors, letting children play with any gendered toys, and discussing non-binary identities with children. Others reported that more non-normative practices (e.g., using they/them pronouns for children) are an essential part of the parenting style. Six of the mothers were unsure what "gender-neutral parenting" was during the interview. Three of these mothers speculated about the practices based on the label; the other three asked for a definition, and I explained it as a collection of potential strategies among which parents can choose (Degges-White 2023).

Most mothers did not self-identify with doing "gender-neutral parenting." First, many of these mothers explained that they are not doing enough of the gender-neutral parenting strategies to "count" as being a gender-netural parent. Second, of mothers who did not identify with the "gender-neutral parenting" label, I find most were supportive or ambivalent about other parents engaging in parenting style. Third, I find other mothers critiqued gender-neutral parenting

strategies that more intensely support gender non-conformity that undermine the idea of gender as natural. These tensions between gender ideologies, parenting identity, and parenting practices were prevalent throughout my conversations with mothers, and I identify these competing ideas and behaviors below.

Not Counting as Doing Gender-Neutral Parenting

Most mothers (19 of 22) did not self-identify with doing "gender-neutral parenting." Participants reported this despite their familiarity with gender-neutral parenting and their reported behaviors aligning with the label (which I outline later). Some mothers explained that they are not doing enough of the gender-neutral parenting strategies to "count" as being a gender-netural parent. For example, Paige, a 34-year-old white mother to two sons, discussed her familiarity with gender-neutral parenting. However, Paige did not raise her children outside the gender binary from birth, something she associated with gender-neutral parenting. She explained, "I don't necessarily subscribe to being completely gender-neutral where you're not one [gender] or the other, and you can choose later." Like most mothers in the study, Paige displayed some gender neutral-parenting strategies, yet did not align herself with the label because she felt she was not entirely committed to gender-neutrality in all aspects of her parenting.

Supporting Gender-Neutral Parenting, with Reservations

Among mothers who did not identify as doing gender-neutral parenting, many were ambivalent about or supported the idea of gender-neutral parenting. These mothers were accepting of other (more radical) parents attaching to gender-neutral parenting, but had reservations about what it means in practice. These concerns include undermining children's autonomy to present within the gender binary and not preparing children for a world that remains

very gendered. Consider Jaya, a 45-year-old Asian mother with two teenage daughters and two pre-teen sons. Jaya was "100% supportive" of people doing gender-neutral parenting, although she parented her children in mostly gender-normative ways. She reflected on a possible pitfall of gender-neutral parenting:

> It's an interesting point of whether you should do gender-neutral names because that's before your child can really identify for themselves who they are…It's those years from birth to when your kid has an opinion. What do we do in those years? Because you're pigeonholed once you're in a name. That kid does not have control, right?

Jaya suggested that giving children gender-neutral names (as a strategy of gender-neutral parenting) does not allow children to have a traditionally gendered name, even though they might eventually want one. Though Jaya was supportive of gender-neutral parenting practices, she identified that neutralizing gender expression could still constrain children's autonomy and categorize them, albeit in a gender-neutral identity. Notably, Jaya did not comment on how adhering to binarily gendered names or gender categorization—that is, adhering to gender norms—may also undermine children's autonomy, an point of tension echoed in many mothers' accounts.

Critiquing the Agenda of Gender-Neutral Parenting

Four of the 22 mothers were highly critical of gender-neutral parenting, though some of their reported parenting practices align with it. They described gender-neutral parenting as an "agenda" which inappropriately pushes children to think about gender non-conformity. Mothers who discussed these concerns were supportive of gender equality for girls and boys, but

conveyed their unease with "unnatural" non-binary identities. Although mothers were quick to report that gender-neutral parenting promotes a political agenda and radical gender ideologies, most respondents did not discuss traditional gender norms as also being part of a gender ideology.

Consider Eliza, a 47-year-old white/Hispanic mother to sons ages nine and 10, who expressed her discomfort with gender-neutral parenting. She did not self-identify as doing gender-netural parenting, and instead said gender-neutral parenting practices are "an agenda, just like religion is." Eliza voiced concern that children cannot conceptualize non-binary identities: "We don't have to celebrate gender. Who fuckin cares. But we're not gonna tell this child, 'you're a boy' or 'you're a girl'?...That's just a lot to put on a child. Cause their little brains are just little mush." Eliza criticized gender-neutral parenting because it provides children access to unnatural non-binary identities that they cannot (and need not) understand. However, she explained that parents should not force their children to do certain behaviors, saying that parents should "let [their children] wear whatever they want to wear." Although Eliza critiqued gender-neutral parenting, she also validated that children should have the autonomy to wear whatever they want, a statement that endorses aspects of the parenting style. Her focus on children's autonomy conflicted with her ideas about non-normative gender identities—she emphasized multiple times in our discussion that children are too young to make decisions about their gender identity. Eliza's responses indicate a tension between gender ideologies and parenting behaviors by evoking different conceptualizations of gender and parenting practices simultaneously.

Similarly, Remi, a 40-year-old white mother with a five-year-old daughter and two-year-old son, did not identify as doing gender-neutral parenting. She said she "would probably not be

having a second play date" with a family who does gender-neutral parenting. Remi worried about the impact gender-neutral parenting "trailblazers" could have on her childrens' ideas about gender:

> I don't need somebody to influence them by telling them that it's okay to be a different gender. Why can't they just decide on their own? So you want to be gender-neutral, let your kid, choose their gender? That's fine, but their sex is still male or female.

Remi distinguishes assigned sex as unchangeable, though gender may be more flexible. She suggested that gender non-conformity is something children should come to in their own time, rather than being enforced upon them by parents. However, Remi did not discuss how her own traditional ideas about gender could also be part of a gender agenda. She does not comment on how parenting choicees that adhere to binary gender categorization of children and socializing them into binary gender norms could also be considered as an infringement on children's autonomy. Remi's account showcases how some mothers associated gender-neutral parenting with intensely supporting gender non-normative identities. For Remi and other mothers, their distancing from the "gender-neutral parenting" label indicates that they may associate the label with a stigmatized status (Link and Phelan 2001) or group of parents they do not want to be associated with.

These accounts reveal the complexity of gender ideologies, where mothers evoked seemingly contradictory ideas about gender to justify their own parenting practices while critiquing those of gender-neutral parenting. In sum: most mothers did not self-identify as doing gender-neutral parenting, yet all of them engaged in at least some strategies aligned with it. Most

mothers did not give themselves credit (and perhaps would not want to give themselves credit) for thinking critically about gender and pushing gender norms in their parenting practices, which I describe below.

Mothers' Engagement in Gender-Neutral Parenting Practices

All but three mothers in the study avoided the label of being a "gender-neutral" parent, yet all mothers engaged in strategies of challenging gender norms in their parenting. Thematic analysis reveals that mothers approached gender via two distinct parenting practices. First, and most commonly, the mothers reported minimizing gender differences by treating girls and boys the same, and by using neutral language. Second, and less commonly, some mothers reported supporting gender non-conformity, including gender roles and expressions that go beyond the bounds of traditional gendered expectations. Unsurprisingly, all mothers reported some parenting behaviors that reinforced gender norms. However, more surprising were the ways mothers challenged traditional gender expectations in their parenting, without self-identifying as doing gender-neutral parenting.

Minimizing Gender Differences

In navigating gender within parenting, one prevalent theme mothers reported is minimizing gender differences. Aligned with gender-neutral parenting (Degges-White 2023; Savage 2022) and influenced by feminist parenting initiatives (Martin 2005), I find that all mothers engaged in at least one of two strategies of minimizing gender differences: (1) treating girls and boys the same and (2) using neutral language when communicating with their children. Committed to their ideas about gender equality for girls and boys (especially for mothers had

both a daughter and son), mothers adhered to equal treatment of children. Notably, most mothers described their attempts to minimize gender differences within a gender binary (comparing girls versus boys), rather than considering identities outside the gender binary, too.

Treating Girls and Boys Equally. Within the theme of minimizing gender differences, many mothers were concerned about equal treatment of girls and boys. Remi (introduced earlier) reflected this desire and described how she provided her children with access to both gendered and non-gendered toys. Remi said, "They both go back and forth between all the toys. They don't think that something's for a girl and something's for a boy. He has a purse; she has a purse. She has cars; he has cars." Remi reported that gender is not a concern when selecting toys for her children: "There is nothing that I would tell my children they cannot play with… it doesn't matter if it's gender appropriate." Providing equal access to the same toys is one way Remi minimized gender differences for her children.

Jaya (introduced earlier) was also concerned about treating her sons and daughters equally. She reflected, "I do really actively try to dismiss gender structures. I let the girls and boys do whatever they want." Jaya described how she feels it is less socially acceptable for boys to show a "more feminine side," and said that she challenges this in her parenting so that all her children are free to express their emotions openly. She recounted her response to her sons when they get hurt and cry: "'Boys can cry any time they want. That is an emotion.' This is what I say to them…there's no reason you cannot let that happen." Jaya reported encouraging both her daughters and sons to be unashamed of their emotions. She minimized gender differences between her children by treating them equally, regardless of their identity as a girl or boy.

Mothers' intentions to minimize gender differences were sometimes thrawrted by their children's gender normative interests. Autumn, a 45-year-old white mother with a seven-year-old son and three-year-old daughter, says she "attempted" to do gender-neutral parenting practices earlier in her parenthood, though she did not self-identify with doing the parenting style. Motivated by her belief in gender equality, she reported how she tried to minimize the gender differences by providing both her daughter and son with a range of opportunities typically associated with girls and boys, including helping Autumn in the kitchen and having science toys. However, she conveyed some disappointment with her son being "all boy." She told me, "Did I do enough to kind of allow it to skew more neutral? … I asked him, 'do you want me to get you a doll?' when he was younger.…He's just not into those things." Autumn's attempts to promote gender equality via gender-neutral parenting strategies were eventually challenged by her child's gender normative inclinations.

Using Neutral Language. Mothers commonly reported the theme of minimizing gender differences by consciously using neutral language when communicating with their children (a strategy of gender-neutral parenting), reinforcing their belief in gender equality. For example, Naomi, a 41-year-old white mother, desribed how she challenged the gendered statements her seven-year-old daughter makes by minimizing gender differences. She said, "If I hear her say something that I think either represents a bias or closed mindedness, I might challenge that…she could be like, 'well, girls can't do this sort of thing,' then I'd say, 'well, anybody can do that.'" Naomi responded to her daughter's gender normative statement with a gender-neutral statement, endorsing the idea that gender does not affect people's capabilities.

Another mother, Doli, a 32-year-old Native American mother, intentionally challenged cisheteronormative ideas by using neutral language around her five-year-old and two-year old sons. She explained, "When [her son] gets on the subject about marriage and about kids, I'll be like 'you and your partner can choose to have kids,' 'you and your spouse,' and I say like, 'that's another word for husband or wife.'" Doli described her reason for using neutral language with her son: she does not "know if his interest is with girls or not." However, Doli noted that her use of neutral language conflicted with her husband's continued use of "wife" when having the same conversation with their son. This highlights how mothers' efforts to minimize gender differences —a strategy of gender-neutral parenting—can sometimes be undermined by co-parents who are less committed to challenging gender norms in their parenting practices.

Other adults can be obstacles to mothers' efforts to minimize gender differences via language. Autumn (introduced earlier) stressed her desire for her son and daughter to be treated the same in school. After becoming frustrated by the language differences in how her children's teachers spoke to her daughter versus her son, Autumn asked them to speak to her daughter in a less feminized way. She said:

> I actually have told her preschool teachers, "Please talk to her like she's a boy," … I want you to talk about how fast she's running. I want you to talk about how quickly she's learning. I want you to talk about everything else besides what she looks like.

Autumn's desire for the use of gender-neutral language around her children—a tactic aligned with her ideas about gender equality—spurred her to ask the other adults in her children's lives to enact the same strategy. These mothers illustrate how language is one way in which they attempt to instill ideas about gender equality and promote equal treatment of girls and boys.

Supporting Gender Non-Conformity

A second theme that emerged in how mothers engaged with practices aligned with gender-neutral parenting is through their accounts of supporting gender non-conformity. Gender non-conformity concerns children's expressions and behaviors that go beyond traditional gendered expectations. Autonomy is a key motivator for mothers allowing gender non-conformity, who let children explore gendered expressions to cultivate their child's inner identity —perpetuating the idea of children's gender as innate (Rees and Saguy 2024). Mothers reported supporting gender non-conformity by challenging traditional gender roles and by allowing their child to present with non-conforming gender expressions.

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles. First, mothers reported the theme of supporting gender non-conformity by challenging traditional gender roles themselves, and by allowing their child to do so. For mothers with both sons and daughters, this often meant providing an example of norm-challenging behavior (e.g., doing household tasks traditionally associated with men) for their children to observe and/or mirror.

Mothers of daughters primarily reported worrying about girls being constrained by traditional gender roles and gender inequality and thus described not enforcing roles associated with women on their daughter. Naomi (introduced earlier) explained, "I didn't want to force traditional mothering and housewife type toys on her. I never got one of those play kitchens." Instead, Naomi—who was an engineer with a PhD—provided her daughter with "play power tools." Similarly, Freya, a 50-year-old white mother, recounted that her experience as a military mechanic led to her doing masculine roles in her marriage. For example, she fixed up the house and car while her husband did the cooking. Freya involves her 10-year-old daughter in

conventionally men's household tasks, explaining "I want her to feel like she has a wide range of skills… I do think it's good for her to be learning that from her mom, because it does challenge those traditional roles." Naomi and Freya supported their belief in girls' ability to take on any gendered role by leading by example (Mesman and Groeneveld 2018), refraining from pushing domestic roles associated with women, and providing daughters opportunities to engage in tasks traditionally associated with men.

Mothers with sons also wanted to their children to challenge traditional gender roles, expressing concerns about how their boys would learn stereotypes of men and boys, and misogynistic ideas. Mothers of boys reported encouraging caregiving behaviors and domestic roles around the house to expose their children to ideas of gender equality. Scarlett, a 43-year old white parent, aspired for their nine- and eight-year-old sons to engage in both roles associated with both men and women. Scarlett identified as non-binary, and told me their desire for their sons to undermine traditional gender stereotypes. They described leading by example with their wife: "[Their sons] see me doing parenting things just as much as [their wife]… they're not gonna see just one parent cooking and cleaning." For Scarlett, it was important that their sons learned how to take on domestic roles: "They both know how to vacuum. They they both know how to do laundry… it's not well the man has to go to work and make the money, and the woman stays home and takes care of baby puke."

Similarly, Whitney, a 38-year-old white mother, said she wants her two-year-old son to "be a little feminist" and "grow up knowing that cooking and cleaning are life skills and not gender roles." She reported that she and her son performed domestic roles together: "He has a clean-up set, which I guess would kind of be sort of like a girl-type item or gender-neutral

item…He likes to clean with me." However, Whitney noted that challenging traditional gender roles was difficult in practice because her relationship did align with some of the conventional division of household labor and carework. Though Whitney wanted her son to grow up knowing men can do domestic roles, she specified that "my husband does not cook or clean, though. So that's a little bit of a challenge." She identifies that fathers' modeling of domestic labor—not just her own as a mother—also shapes how her child understands gender roles and aspirations of the future (Croft et al. 2014; Risman 1998). Whitney recognized the tension in having some traditional gender roles within her home, but hoped that doing domestic labor with her son would be a powerful example for him of challenging gender conformity.

Supporting Non-Conforming Gender Expressions. Another theme in supporting gender non-conformity was mothers validating their children's non-conforming gender expressions. About a third of participants reported validating their some of their children's gender non-conforming behaviors, but only four mothers described intentionally wanting their children to explore gender non-conforming expressions. Importantly, the remaining mothers who supported non-conforming behaviors did not do so because they wanted to deliberately challenge gender categories but instead were committed to supporting children's bodily autonomy generally (e.g., choosing their own outfits, deciding when they want hugs from family members), a philosophy they extended to gender non-conforming behaviors.

Scarlett (introduced earlier) explained their support for their children to explore different gender expressions. Scarlett recalled how their son developed an interest in wearing makeup and nail polish. Their son wore "heavy eyeliner. We're talking like David Bowie style. I was like, 'Yeah, dude, you're a rock star. This is awesome!'" When their son was teased by girls in his

preschool classroom for his gender non-conforming expression, Scarlett quickly defended it, telling him: "'That's a bunch of crap, dude! You can do whatever the hell you want to do. Nail polish is nail polish. I wear nail polish. There are tons of boys that wear nail polish.'" Scarlett showed their son pictures and videos of men wearing makeup and nail polish, attempting to validate the non-conforming behavior and emphasize their son's autonomy over his gender expression.

Another mother, Remi (introduced earlier) was more ambivalent, but still supportive, of her two-year old son's non-conforming behavior. She reported that one tenet of her parenting as "their body, their rules." This commitment to her children's autonomy overrode her own preference for more traditional gender expressions. Efforts to validate her son's gender non-conformity were complicated by her husband's more traditional views on gender and appearance. She explained:

> My son will throw on a dress… [Her son] loves nail polish. My husband won't let me do that. To me? I don't care. But my husband more wants to follow the societal norms. He doesn't want to be as taboo. Where like I don't mind towing the line a little bit here and there, and letting them be more explorative.

Remi reported trying to parent around her husband's traditional views, saying that he "won't let my son play with makeup. And I respond differently… I told my son, 'If you want to explore makeup, you're gonna have to wait till you're older. Yes, some boys wear makeup.'" Though co-parenting constrained Remi's support of her son's gender non-conforming behaviors, she still attempted to legitimize the expressions as an extension her child's autonomy.

DISCUSSION

Much research considers parents as important agents of gender socialization who acculturate children into gender norms (Kane 2006; Mesman and Groeneveld 2018). However, less research considers parenting practices that intentionally challenge gender conformity (Rahilly 2022). This is an important oversight, given younger cohorts are more likely to identify as transgender or gender non-conforming than older cohorts (Lagos 2022) and that gender identities and expressions outside of the "norm" are becoming increasingly recognized in the U.S. (Parker et al. 2022). Using data from interviews with 22 mothers in Southern California, I provide insight into the tensions in mothers' gender conceptualizations and their gendered parenting practices. My data reveal two important findings.

First, gender ideologies and parenting behaviors reported by mothers were in tension with each other. All mothers interviewed engaged in the practices of minimizing gender differences and/or supporting gender non-conformity, yet all but three mothers distanced themselves from the label of doing gender-neutral parenting. Instead, most mothers motivated their parenting choices by their belief in gender equality and their children's autonomy, remaining (to some degree) anchored to dominant gender ideologies. This allowed mothers to simultaneously promote their children's agency in shaping their own gender expression while avoiding labels that would associate their families with a "radical social agenda." This distinguishes them from parents who are committed to challenging gender categories entirely and/or promoting children's gender exploration (Averett 2016; Rahilly 2022).

Second, despite avoiding the label of gender-neutral parenting, I find that mothers—motivated by ideologies of gender equality and bodily autonomy—socialized their children into

gender via two distinct parenting strategies. Evoking ideas of gender equality, mothers described minimizing gender differences by treating girls and boys the same, and by using neutral language. Mothers' desires for gender equality for their children extends patterns of women desiring gender equality in the home (Hochschild 2012; Risman and Myers 1997) and second-wave feminism efforts to parent in nonsexist ways (Martin 2005). Using neutral language in parenting styles mirrors social patterns of "neutralizing" our gendered world, such as through designing gender-neutral bathrooms, and using neutral language in legal settings (Saguy et al. 2020) and documents (Saguy and Williams 2023). Importantly, mothers' ideas about gender equality remained mostly within the gender binary, suggesting that mothers are motivated to challenge gender norms in ways that are most familiar to them but are less engaged in practices that radically consider the construction of gender categories.

I also find that some mothers supported gender non-conformity. Motivated by their belief in bodily autonomy, they reported supporting non-conformity by challenging gender roles (both doing so themselves and encouraging their children to do so), and by supporting children's non-conforming gender expressions. This is consistent with literature on parents modeling gendered behaviors for their children (Mesman and Groeneveld 2018) and affirming their children's gender non-conformity (Gray et al. 2016; Meadow 2011; Rahilly 2015). Because gender non-conforming behaviors are more accepted for girls than boys (Kane 2006; Khanna and Meadow 2023; Rees and Saguy 2024), the emphasis in these interviews on supporting boys' non-conformity suggests a notable segment of parents who—grounded in their belief in children's autonomy—are more comfortable with the spectrum of gendered expressions for children of any gender than previous cohorts of parents. However, unlike parents who are wholeheartedly committed to the gender

buffet (Averett 2016), the mothers in this research varied in their recognition of how their parenting practices push the boundaries of gender socialization, and to the extent that they supported children's non-conforming gender expressions.

My analysis provides a detailed interpretation of how mothers account for gender in their parenting strategies, but characteristics of my data limit the possible interpretations. First, my interview data do not include observations of parenting behaviors. However, the meanings that interview participants ascribe to their experiences are important sociologically (Lamont and Swidler 2014), thus, in this analysis, I consider the narratives of my participants to be meaningful representations of their parenting practices.

Second, most mothers in my sample are white, affluent, college educated, and/or heterosexual. It is possible that accessing gender-neutral parenting strategies requires an advantaged status. Sampling from online parenting groups likely contributed to this because women with privileged identities (e.g., white, middle- and upper-class) often control online parenting communities (Gibson 2019) and set standards for "good" parenting (Minnotte 2023). However, this makes these women an important group to study regarding gendered parenting strategies. Parenting strategies may vary by racial identity (Manning 2019; Vincent and Maxwell 2016), class privilege (Lareau 2002; Neary 2021; Warner and Milkie 2013; Wilson and Worsley 2021), and sexual orientation (Averett 2016; Goldberg and Garcia 2016; Stacey and Biblarz 2001). Future research should consider how gendered parenting practices are shaped by identity intersections, diverse family structures (Jensen and Sanner 2021), or cultural gender socialization norms, such as marianismo and familismo among Latino/a families (Ackert and Wikle 2022). One could expect that having multiple marginalized identities constrains parents' abilities to do

gender-neutral parenting. Parents may be more concerned about aspects of their children's identity other than gender, such as preparing non-white and multiracial children for a racist world (DePouw and Matias 2016; Manning 2021; Reyna 2022; Zhu, Wang, and Cheah 2024). In contrast, parents who challenge cisgender and heteronormative norms themselves may be more likely to adopt gender-neutral parenting practices. Future scholarship should consider more how non-binary or transgender parents may socialize children into gender differently than cisgender different-gender parents or cisgender same-gender parents. This gender socialization may include helping children understand a parent's gender transition (Dierckx et al. 2017), taking on parenting roles that are not constrained by the gender binary or cisheteronormative expectations (Masterson, Norris, and Bernstein 2025), and engaging in an egalitarian division of household and childcare labor (Tornello 2020) that may be systematically different than cisgender parents.

My findings cannot speak to the parenting practices of fathers. Women in different-gender partnerships continue to do more of the domestic labor, care work, and cognitive labor in households than fathers, extending their days into second and sometimes third shifts at home (Calarco et. al 2021; Cousins 2021; Daminger 2019; Daminger 2020; Hochschild 2012). Mothers' high engagement in time with children suggests mothers are likely to impart gendered ideas onto their children in a way that is differently patterned from fathers. Scholarship signals that parent-child relationships may differ by both parent's gender (Biblarz and Stacey 2010; Starrels 1994) and child's gender (Raley and Bianchi 2006; Starrels 1994) and that men and women conceptualize parenthood in different, gendered ways (Bell 2020). Further, fathers' engagement in domestic labor shapes their children's future engagement in it (Croft et al. 2014; Risman 1998), and that fathers' parental involvement may be particularly important in predicting

engagement in gender non-conforming behavior in sons (Herbaut, Delès, and Diter 2024). Future work should consider how fathers engage in gender socialization differently than mothers, exploring possible tensions between co-parents regarding gender neutrality and gender non-conformity. My discussion with mothers about their co-parents hints that fathers may be more likely than mothers to want their children (particularly sons) to adhere to gender norms, and that fathers are more skeptical of gender-neutral parenting strategies overall. Mothers (in different-gender relationships) who want to engage in gender parenting strategies may be undermined by men partners who are less committed to challenging the gender system.

Overall, this study of mothers sets the stage for further exploration into how caregivers navigate the changing scene of gender identity and expression. Expanding upon gender socialization scholarship, this work highlights how mothers, as key agents of gender socialization, are conscious of how their parenting practices exist in relation to a more gender-expansive world. Though most mothers do not identify as doing gender-neutral parenting, they engage in practices aligned with the parenting style, such as minimizing gender difference and supporting gender non-conformity. My research indicates that even in cisheteronormative families, there may be more parents critically considering gender socialization than we assume. With executive orders attempting to reinforce the gender binary (The White House 2025a; 20205b), these findings have important implications for how future generations may understand gender socialization and challenge traditional gender expectations, reshaping how our social world experiences and addresses gender-based disparities.

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