Gender-Neutral Childrearing: Beyond Idealism or Realism

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The 1970s saw some feminist (Anderson & McIntyre 1976; Firestone 1972; Piercy 1979) and academic visions or calls for gender-neutral childrearing which have largely gone out of fashion (see Martin’s 2005 literature review). Martin charts the loss of popularity for the 1970s accounts as due to their reliance on crude notions of socialization which have since been considered to over-privilege and simplify notions of structures of gender in their analyses and are now less influential (Martin 2005). Additionally, in being sometimes utopian, as I have charted elsewhere (Nicholas 2014 [forthcoming]), these accounts are often morally idealistic, focused too heavily on ends such that the political reality of reaching them remains under theorised.

However, there has been a recent surge in popular interest in contemporary gender-neutral childrearing practices in mainstream media internationally, and particularly a handful of specific high-profile cases. This has not been addressed in academia in terms of understanding the parents’ or educators’ approaches to these practices in this ‘wave,’ the motivations of the parents or educators, the public reaction, or the social efficacy of the practices.
This paper therefore systematically reviews a sample from contemporary media discourses about gender-neutral childrearing to explore whether there are any voices in the conversations which present more nuanced accounts of ontology than those from the 1970s (specifically, the nature of gender), and whether this correlates with more nuanced visions or strategies. Additionally, I am interested in the manner in which these voices and attempts at non-binary analyses are framed in popular discourse as this addresses their efficacy for broader social impact. This represents a general preoccupation of mine with non-oppositional ways of perceiving the self and others, and how they are recuperated by dominant binary modes of thought.

The topic of gender-neutral childrearing inevitably becomes a fundamentally moral conversation, with commentators typically asking ‘Is Gender-Neutral Parenting Right?’ (de Miguel 2012). This informs my interest in this paper in the ontological and normative reasoning different stakeholders engage to reach the prescriptive conclusions which characterise this debate. Given the limited space, I focus here mostly on analysis of the different prescriptions in terms of the conceptual categories from political philosophy of moral idealism and political realism - as operationalized and applied by Beauvoir (2004) - to explore whether, as in Martin’s (2005) literature review, the accounts all fall in to retrogressive binary thinking about ontology (structure/agency) and therefore practice (idealism/realism). I discuss popular accounts alongside allegorical ontological and ethical arguments in more contemporary feminist sociology and philosophy (see Gatens 1994; Hird 2004a; Van Lenning 2004) which have explicitly grappled with the normative and political questions of whether gender can and should be eradicated, in order to draw parallels in their
reasoning. I find that, while a handful of individuals (Belkin 2011; Orenstein 2011; Witterick 2011) have attempted to disperse non-binary and non-reductionist understandings of gender identity and the strategy of gender-neutral childrearing in the public domain, their accounts or practices are usually interpreted with reductionist logic which attempts to negate their expediency in (differently) perceived ‘real worlds.’ The contemporary popular accounts of these practices mostly attempt to devalue them by framing them as hopelessly idealistic, with reference to either the biological, psychological or social facticity of gender, invoked by accounts which present themselves as conversely realist, but ultimately conservative. What most of the accounts lack, however, is an holistic consideration of the complexity of gender reification, which is consistent with a less dualistic consideration of means and ends. I argue that a more truly pragmatic approach which does not collapse in to defeatism, would be one that takes account of both short and long term aims and attempts to transcend this idealism/realism dualism.

Methods

In order to get an idea of the dominant ways in which this issue was being framed in the contemporary media, a google search was undertaken, using search terms ‘gender neutral childrearing,’ ‘gender neutral parenting,’ ‘genderless parenting,’ and ‘genderless childrearing.’ After discovering three contemporary cases which were clearly dominant – Storm (Canada), Pop (Sweden) and Sasha (UK) – I limited my results to only articles which discussed these cases and to media after 2009. This allowed me to ensure a sample with comparable results and to ensure that the media discussions pertained to this recent ‘wave’ of gender neutral parenting. Top google results were selected for newspapers, with the assumption that those results with the most hits represented the dominant perspectives. The
English language results were international but appeared only from Australia, UK, Sweden, Canada and the US, and often the same articles were published across publications in different countries. In this case, only the version with the most hits was used, and this multiple publication taken as an indication of wide readership of the specific account. The articles varied between reports and editorial / opinion pieces, and there was a consistent variation in accounts within countries, such that country of origin seemed an insignificant variable. The political position of each publication was unsurprisingly a more significant variable in terms of the framing of the issue. I have taken this as a given and consider their accounts to be of interest merely because of their wide readership. I then undertook inductive analysis of these sources, looking for the dominant ontological premises of each account, i.e. what they assert / imply the nature of sex/gender is, and their normative conclusions about what gender should be like.

**Findings: Idealism/Realism**

The explicated aims of gender-neutral child-rearing are often framed idealistically, as premised on the application of abstract principles and oriented towards long-term social aims. For example, the Swedish parents of Pop, publicised in the media in 2009, explicitly stated that the ideological root of their decision to raise their child without gendered expectations from labelling peri sex was a dedication to ‘the feminist philosophy that gender is a social construction’ (Parafianowicz 2009: n.p.) and Sasha’s mother ‘wanted to avoid all that stereotyping’ (Higginbotham 2012: n.p.).
I found that the majority of newspaper accounts presenting the practice of gender-neutral childrearing followed a similar narrative. They presented the practices, often with a particular case, briefly summarised the motivations as led by ideology, and then offered extensive counter-arguments with realist reasoning. Paradigmatic of this is an article in the (admittedly conservative) British *Daily Mail* (Leonard 2011). This presents the parents as ‘imposing their ideology on the child’ and goes on to frame it as abstract moral idealism and ‘crude social engineering’ (Leonard 2011). Likewise, Latin American news site Vooxxi presents Sasha and Storm’s parents as ‘just imposing their political and ideological values on a newborn’ (de Miguel 2012). The normative argument made in both is that it will ultimately result in harm to the child’s long-term wellbeing, due to the facticity of gendered physiology because ‘biological facts are difficult to suppress,’ and the facticity of social norms which mean that the parents have ‘condemned Storm to a life of bullying’ (Leonard 2011). This demonstrates an account of biological determinism leading to normative arguments framed as political realism, calling for a functionalist maintenance of clear gender roles following from biological sex: ‘kids need to know what their gender identity is as they need to put themselves into a certain position to fully understand social roles and fit in’ (de Miguel 2012).

The ‘idealists’ are presented as naïvely utopian and as neglecting the immediate consequences of their practices, sometimes as neglecting the biological ‘realities’ of gender, and sometimes as ideologically totalitarian. The ‘realists’ then hold an implicit repressive notion of an inherent true identity (Foucault 1978), varyingly presented as resultant from biology or psychology, which they use as the basis for presenting the idealists as denying facticity. They consider either or both that binary sex is biologically determined or binary gender is psychologically determined and inherent to identity, and therefore to deny
explication of it is to keep a child from discovering the ‘truth’ about themselves and to confuse their identity. Or, if they do concede entirely or partially to the power of the social, they make another realist - but socially determinist - argument that the deeply gendered nature of society means that a child cannot avoid being gendered.

This later, socially derived ontology, can be seen in some news stories which lend support to accounts which calls for a social realism, but one that is no less ontologically determinist than a biological determinism. US based ABC news was typical of articles which gave a great deal of column space to child psychologists who emphasise the short term concerns of healthy social adjustment, lending determination to pre-existing gender categories as support for not challenging the fundamental bigenderism (Gilbert 2009) of society. ABC quote the director of training in child and adolescent psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital at length saying ‘the mission to have masculine and feminine traits more equalized and flexible and not judgemental is awesome in a utopian community. But we take pride in our [sic] sexual identity’ (in James 2011). This echoes liberal feminist arguments, such as those of Korsgaard, that the inequalities of gender can and should be overcome without significant challenges to the identity aspect of it which people hold so dear (Korsgaard 1995).

Likewise in academic considerations, despite fundamentally also sharing an ontological premise that both biological dimorphism and bigenderism are to a great extent socially constructed, among the few feminist academics to explicitly engage with the possibility of eradicating gender, Van Lenning (2000) and Gatens (1994) still hold that the best strategy is not a getting rid of sexual difference but rather a revaluation of the existing categories. Van Lenning makes the more realist argument that, despite the social basis of sex/gender
articulated by ‘new materialist’ and ‘post-constructionist’ feminists among others, the only workable strategy is ‘some change from the extension of the categories of masculinity and femininity, rather than from attempts to break free from them altogether’ (Van Lenning 2004: 25). Gatens also, after positing the social origins of the imaginary binary sexed body, still concludes that ‘to suggest the degendering of society as political strategy is hopelessly utopian, ahistorical, and functions theoretically and practically as a diversionary tactic’ (Gatens 1994: 150). Similar arguments about extending, but not ending, gender are quoted in the (US) ABC story, which quotes an author of a child advice book, who criticises the strategy, suggesting that it is better to allow a fixed identity, but to downplay the associations of those categories: ‘not all boys have to play with action heroes or girls with Barbies. You can certainly raise a child in a fairly gender-neutral home’ (Brown in James 2011: n.p.). I, and other critics of sexual difference (e.g. Delphy 1993; Hausman 1999) would argue, however, that such approaches under-theorise the extent to which gender and oppositional thought more broadly is inherently a hierarchical mode of organising the social world. Indeed, in considering the limits of bigenderism for trans* folk, Hausman concludes that attempting to only to alter sex/gender ‘will keep us – a collective, inclusive us – from tackling systematic discrimination of women and of those persons whose gender presentation is at odds with cultural norms’ (Hausman 1999: 192).

**Beyond Binaries**

My primary research question here is whether normatively informed but socially realistic approaches to deconstructing sex/gender are possible, i.e. I am interested in whether there is the possibility of ‘an ethos and mode of sociability that escapes … dialectical determination or that emerges as a third term effectively exceeding the dialectical opposition which forms
its condition’ (Butler 2011: n.p.). In fact, I argue that many of the practices charged above of such idealistic thinking divorced from the ‘real-world’ and pragmatic consequences inhere a more nuanced ontology and normative reasoning than these realist criticisms allow for. There are voices which attempt to transcend some of the binaries in which this debate is mired: boy/girl, biological/social, short-term/long-term.

A more nuanced ontological argument was presented in the *New York Times*. Orenstein (2011) presented the arguments of neuroscientists about the malleability of childhood brains, lending more weight to the importance of explicit reflection on the social which is seen to impact on which neural pathways are strengthened. Per conclusion is that

At issue, then, is not nature or nurture but how nurture becomes nature: the environment in which children play and grow can encourage a range of aptitudes or foreclose them. So blithely indulging – let alone exploiting – stereotypically gendered play patterns may have a more negative long-term impact on kids’ potential than parents imagine (Orenstein 2011).

This echoes a new dominant strand in gender studies which likewise has developed less reductionist accounts of the biological/social, most paradigmatically demonstrated by Fausto-Sterling’s *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (2012). This is just the most accessible account in a contemporary trend of ‘new materialism’ or ‘post-constructionism’ which tend towards eschewing reductionist arguments which also seem to lead to reductionist gender politics (see also Hird 2004a; 2004b; Lykke 2010). These contemporary ontological analyses seem the most amenable to underpinning arguments for gender-neutral childrearing.
Another approach which does not get mired in the ontological issues is to bracket off the questions of the nature of sex/gender determinism and instead to envision a different premise to interaction which focuses instead on an ethos. This is perhaps best summed up by Storm’s parents as a responsive listening ethic. Whilst critics have criticised gender-neutral child-rearing practices on the grounds of idealism, in an opportunity to respond to the debates in the media in per own words, Storm’s parent Witterick stated that

… the idea to keep the baby’s sex private was a tribute to authentically trying to get to know a person, listening carefully and responding to meaningful cues given by the person themselves (Witterick 2011: n.p.).

This perspective seems consistent with contemporary radical queer theorisations which articulate queer as both a deconstructive ethic and a positive ethos of self-definition free from binary gender and sexuality (Heckert 2010). This demonstrates that this practice is informed by ideals, but that these are fundamentally positive, and in fact eschew the issue of ontology in place of a non-foundational normative argument. The values with which Witterick seeks to replace gender include ‘non-negotiable limit setting related to safety, kindness, self-respect, health, fulfilment and fairness’ (Witterick 2011: n.p). While this is idealist in the sense articulated by Beauvoir above, it does not subordinate short-term wellbeing to ideals. The examples which I have addressed here seem often to consider their strategies to inhere both long-term, idealistic prefigurative aims for society and to be beneficial for their children in the short term. Indeed, in the face of realist critique, Witterick has framed per strategy as one which ze believes is preferable for per child’s well-being - in per definition of well-being as a child who has a ‘strong sense of self’ and is well loved - in the short term:

When faced with inevitable judgment by others, which child stands tall (and sticks up for others) — the one facing teasing despite desperately trying to fit in, or the one with a strong sense of self and at least two 'go-to' adults who love them unconditionally? Well, I guess you know which one we choose (Witterick 2011 in Poisson 2011: n.p.).
Conclusion / Recommendations

Given that the accounts of these often well-considered practices are usually presented in such reductionist discourses, then, how might readings of the practices which are more akin to their explicit intentions be fostered? Overall, then, this example seems consistent with my findings elsewhere (Nicholas 2014 [forthcoming]), of the power and persistence of binarism and bigenderism (Gilbert 2009) as a mode of thought. Assuming that bigenderism is ultimately restrictive and its dissolution should be a long-term goal (idealism), but also that isolated attempts to reject it may have harmful short term effects (realism), one can either capitulate to the weight of tradition and social reification, or consider what less damaging, more holistic strategies may entail. As I have argued elsewhere (Nicholas 2014 [forthcoming]), attempts to foster such non-dualistic modes of thought fall flat when those “reading” the attempt lack the capacities to read it in the mode intended, as noted by Hutcheon (1994) in reference to postmodernist feminist attempts to implement irony or doubled-vision readings as subversive practices. This indicates that, to some extent, the practices which are intended to be subversive cannot be assumed to be comprehensible in the intended terms by all who read them, owing to the very delimitations of discursive context outlined above (Butler 1993). It must be kept in mind that such a persistent social facticity as gender and binary sex is resultant from the coalescence of subjective identification, intersubjective framing and preconceptions, existing discourses, and gendered institutions (Lorber 1986; Lorber, Risman & Sherwood 2013). Thus any strategies which privilege only one of these terrains run the risk of being recuperated by the strength of the others. A possible way forward from this impasse of retrogressive collapse or recuperation and re-framing may be embedding the capacities to “read” practices as intended in the practices. There has been some promising empirical research into the capacity for altering dualistic
cognition and means of cognising others. Given that ‘Living within heteronormative culture means learning to “see” straight, to “read” straight, to “think” straight’ (Sumara & Davis 1999: 202), research into how queer “reading practices” may be fostered may be a fruitful companion.

References


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1 I use gender neutral pronouns (per to replace her/him and ze to replace she/he) throughout this paper as I do throughout my work (Nicholas 2014 [forthcoming]).