

# Children's Gender Identity Development: The Dynamic Negotiation Process Between Conformity and Authenticity

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**Britney G Brinkman<sup>1</sup>, Kelly L. Rabenstein<sup>1</sup>,  
Lee A. Rosén<sup>2</sup>, and Toni S. Zimmerman<sup>3</sup>**

## Abstract

In the current study, 45 girls and 41 boys participated in focus groups following a program designed to teach them about social justice. The children articulated the discrepancy between their own gender identity and gender role stereotypes and discussed potential problems with conforming to gender role expectations as well as consequences of nonconformity. They articulated the ways in which gender identity is complex and they described the importance of choice and authenticity. Based on these findings, we present a model of how children's gender identity develops in relationship to experiences of gender prejudice. In particular, we highlight how children act and react to gender role socialization as part of a dynamic negotiation process. Throughout the current article we strive to highlight the need for an alternative in the gender conformity process for children, with children in the position of power regarding their own gender identity development.

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<sup>1</sup>Chatham University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA

<sup>3</sup>Human Development and Family Studies, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Britney G Brinkman, Chatham University, Woodland Road, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 15232, USA

Email: [bbrinkman@chatham.edu](mailto:bbrinkman@chatham.edu)

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Gender identity is a topic that is hotly debated. While some assert that gender has a one-to-one relationship with sex (a biological orientation), many have argued that gender is a constructed trait. Previous perspectives on gender identity in children focused on essentialist, developmental, or socialization theories, which have often emphasized a deterministic, static, dichotomous, and/or passive perspective on identity development (Adams, Montemayor, & Gullotta, 1996). In the current article we explore children's gender identity development with an emphasis on the role of children's reactions to experiences of gender prejudice. We present qualitative data generated by focus groups about gender to highlight voices of children. We build on an interactionist perspective of children's identity development and argue for greater attention to be paid to three important issues. First, we assert that children should be viewed as interactive agents for whom expression of gender may vary depending on the situation, rather than passive players in the socialization process. Second, we argue that researchers should place greater emphasis on understanding how gender identity is influenced by the consequences of nonconformity, especially experiences of gender prejudice. Finally, we encourage researchers to have greater recognition of children's articulated desire to be "authentic" and not to be limited by gender norms.

**Gender Identity Development:  
Traditional Theories**

Traditional approaches to conceptualizing the development of gender identity can be categorized into three general types of theories (a) essentialist, (b) developmental, and (c) socialization. Theorists from these orientations differ greatly in their explanations of how gender identity forms and develops. The first type of theory about the development of gender identity emphasizes an essentialist (and often dichotomous) approach. These theories argue that gender is predetermined and directly tied to sex (the biological categories of male and female as determined by genetics and hormones; Delphy, 1993). These approaches suggest that gender is dichotomous such that all males are inherently masculine and all females are inherently feminine (conversations about intersex, gender queer, or transsexual individuals are usually absent). Within this theory, gender identity is not necessarily something that develops, but simply unfolds over time. Developmental theories

(the second category) argue that gender identity develops over time in predictable and “normative” stages such as those suggested by Piaget or Erikson. These theories assert that as children get older, they internalize the gender expectations they have learned and many of them endorse rigid gender rules (Warin, 2000). Both the essentialist and developmental approaches are limited in that they overgeneralize and assume gender identity development is the same for all children. This assumption does not fully explain individual differences and can lead to pathologizing gender atypical children. These approaches also present children as being mostly passive participants in the identity development process.

Our work builds on the third category of socialization theories that are perhaps the most commonly utilized framework for understanding gender identity development. This approach describes accumulation of gender identity as a process that occurs over time due to the influence of others. Children receive direct verbal messages about what is appropriate behavior for boys and girls, in addition to getting unspoken messages by watching how adults model gender roles (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In her qualitative study of preschool children and their parents, Emily Kane (2006) found that parents are “. . . often consciously aware of their own role in accomplishing gender with and for their [children]” (p. 149).

### *Children as Interactive Agents*

While socialization theories address individual differences in children, many of them have presented children as passive objects on which socialization happens. However, we argue that children are in fact active agents who recognize the pressures to conform and adjust their behavior accordingly. While our work draws heavily on socialization theories, we assert that children play a more active role in their development and make conscious decisions regarding conformity than those theories suggest. We are informed by Freeman and Mathison’s (2009) perspective that children are social actors and they are not only shaped by their environment but also interact with and affect the environment by their behavior.

In fact, much research suggests that children’s expression of their gender identity is affected simply by the presence of others. When children are alone, they tend to exhibit less gender specific play activities. Maccoby (1990) found that when children play alone the gender-based play behaviors are minimal. In other words, children do not adopt particular gender role-based behaviors unless another child enters the playroom. Serbin, Connor, Burchardt, and Citron (1979) found that both boys and girls will play with gender “inappropriate”

toys when they assume they are playing alone (behind one-way mirrors) but will adopt the more “appropriate” toy if another child enters the room, especially if the other child is not of their own sex. This process of behaving differently when alone or in the presence of other children is a result of a conscious decision-making process on the part of a child, taking into account the potential risks and benefits of gender conformity. By first assuming that children are active players in their identity-making/expression process, we were able to explore their understandings of their own identity development as a dynamic and complex process.

### *Consequences of Nonconformity*

We argue that researchers examining gender identity development should place greater attention to the consequences of nonconformity, particularly experiences of gender prejudice. Much research has demonstrated ways in which children are rewarded for engaging in gender appropriate behavior and punished if they behave outside the norms (Kane, 1990; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Risman, 1998). In a recent study, 56% of students who identified themselves as gender nonconforming reported being teased, called names, or bullied at school (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2012). While awareness of the consequences of not conforming to gender role expectations is not new, our understanding of how children develop and express gender identity would be better informed by examining such consequences in greater detail.

There are some advantages to conforming to gender role expectations, including being accepted by one’s peers. Being part of the group and feeling accepted can prove to be a protective factor against loneliness and depression throughout adolescence (Baskin, Wampold, Quintana, & Enright, 2010). However, conformity can lead to inauthenticity, which has a number of potential negative consequences. Children who alter their self-concept to conform to gender role expectations may experience difficulties in their later sexual life (Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005) or harassment and abuse (Haldeman, 2000).

The notion of conformity or nonconformity is problematized by the fact that gender role norms are contextually based. While some authors have attempted to define characteristics that are considered stereotypically “feminine” or “masculine,” these traits are by no means universal or timeless. Therefore, gender conformity (or lack thereof) must be understood in relationship to what are accepted gender norms for a particular place and time. Renold (2005) describes “hegemonic” boys as those who “actively construct

their masculinities or ‘boy-ness’ through what they consider to be culturally exalted forms of masculinity” (p. 67). In this study, we ask children to conceptualize conformity/nonconformity by first describing what they consider to be stereotypical traits for boys and girls and what it means to express or not express those traits.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were part of a larger study evaluating the impact of the Fairness for All Individuals Through Respect (FAIR) program (see Brinkman, Rosén, Zimmerman, & Jedinak, 2010). Forty-five girls and 41 boys participated in focus groups following the FAIR program. The average age of the participants was  $M = 10.8$ , with a range of 10 to 13 years of age. The participants self-reported their ethnicity being White non-Hispanic ( $n = 47$ , 55%), Hispanic/Latino/a ( $n = 25$ , 29%), Native American ( $n = 1$ , 1%), Asian American ( $n = 1$ , 1%), multiethnic ( $n = 7$ , 8%), or other ( $n = 5$ , 6%). All classrooms were recruited by sending emails to teachers in Northern Colorado school districts to invite their participation in the study. The family income for all students in the study ranged from less than US\$10,000 (7% of families) a year to more than US\$90,000 (24%) a year and 48% of the families making between US\$40,000 and US\$90,000 a year. The number of total family members in a family ranged from 2 to 12 members, with 76% of the families having 3 to 5 members total.

### *Procedure*

Once the teachers agreed to participate, letters and consent forms were sent to all parents of the students in the classes. The letters explained the program and purpose of the research project. Parents were informed that all students would participate in the activities as part of the school curriculum, and the parents were given the option of signing a consent form to allow their child to participate in the research aspect of the program (i.e., completing the surveys and participating in the focus group). Contact information for the principal investigator was also provided. The FAIR program consists of five experiential activities designed to teach children about social justice concepts. The curriculum for the FAIR program is available online at <http://www.fair.cahs.colostate.edu>. All five activities were administered during one school day in which students just engaged in the FAIR program and the focus groups.

Focus groups were chosen as a venue to allow students to provide input about their own change processes, their ideas about gender identity, as well as their opinions regarding the program. Focus groups have been used with children and in school settings to evaluate programs and to explore children's perceptions of phenomena (Kress & Shoffner, 2007; Nabors, Ramos, Weist, 2001). The emphasis on participants' perspectives make focus groups empowering for their participants and allow researchers to examine aspects of a concept that may not be fully explained through quantitative research. Focus groups with children can allow researchers to explore children's experiences in a developmentally appropriate manner, rather than relying on children's reading skills (Kennedy, Kools, & Krueger, 2001). Focus groups also provide advantages over individual interviews regarding flexibility, efficient use of time, and direct contact between children and researchers. Focus groups also provide an opportunity for children to interact with each other, listen to each other's perspectives, and build and develop their own ideas.

At the end of the day, immediately following the FAIR program, the students participated in small focus groups (5-8 children in each) led by a researcher or research assistants. Each group took place in a quiet area where children would be able to hear each other and the researcher and to minimize outside distractions. Each group sat in a circle on the floor with the audio recorder in the center. The researcher asked questions and encouraged students to take turns talking and to be respectful of each others' responses. Based on Krueger's (1988) model for semistructured focus groups, a number of questions were asked at each group, but the groups also allowed for the students to be active leaders in the discussion by introducing new ideas and themes. The focus groups lasted approximately 35 to 40 minutes. Each group was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

### *Focus Group Questions*

The focus group questions were first piloted with a group of fifth graders who participated in the FAIR program and changes were made to the questions based on their suggestions. For each of the five activities, the students were asked the following questions:

What did you learn about yourself from this activity? What did you learn about how to treat other people from this activity? Before this program, did you ever think about this topic? What made you think about this? What do you think now?

The students were also asked the following general questions:

Have you had any experiences where you were treated differently or badly because you were a boy or girl? Do you think there are things boys can do that girls should not do? Do you think there are things girls can do that boys should not do? If you had an audience of kids your age, what would you tell them about what you learned today?

### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

A multiple case study qualitative approach was utilized. Each focus group was treated as a single case. As Nabors et al. (2001) note, participants in focus groups may be influenced by each other and may change their opinions based on the comments of other members. For that reason, we focus on understanding each focus group as a single case, rather than focusing on each individual participant. In addition, we note the frequency with which themes are mentioned in the groups, thus providing some context for which ideas are common and which are more unique.

The written transcripts of the focus groups were analyzed by the first author and a trained research assistant. In the initial stage, the principal researcher utilized a process of open coding to label individual units of data in a way that they could be identified, compared to other segments, and further analyzed (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2006). Categories were then developed to provide a level of analysis that demonstrated the relationship between the open codes. These categories were developed systematically by using constant comparative analysis, a method that involves comparing data to identify similarities and differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Hennink's (2007) strategies for analyzing focus group data and identifying frequencies and consistencies of themes were utilized. In particular, themes were identified based on how many groups they appeared in and the number of times they emerged. After the codes were developed by the primary researcher, they were reviewed by an independent collaborator for clarity and to verify the comprehensiveness of the themes and the appropriateness of the coding.

In this article we include data from the focus groups where the students discuss aspects related to gender identity development, conformity or nonconformity to gender role expectations, and their desire to have choices about gender role expression. It is important to note that the children used some of the language they learned from the FAIR program. In particular, children refer to being "in the box" or "out of the box." One of the FAIR activities explored common stereotypes and expectations where the stereotypes related to gender

were considered “in the box” and behaviors or traits that challenged these stereotypes were termed “out of the box.”

## Findings

### *Challenging the Stereotypes*

Many of the students described ways in which they or someone they knew did not conform to gender role stereotypes, or how they were out of the box ( $N = 42$  references). Some students simply stated that, “I like to be out of the box.” One boy gave an example of how he feels like he does not fit into the gender box saying, “I love babies.” A number of students gave examples of other people who did not fit gender role stereotypes, saying things like, “I know some girls that play with trucks and stuff” or “My dad likes to cook.” Another student described how both of her siblings challenged gender role stereotypes, saying, “My brother would play with Barbie dolls, and my sister would play with action figures and footballs and everything.”

A few students indicated that they were known for challenging stereotypes or being “out of the box” and they sometimes felt limited by this. For instance one girl described her experiences of feeling like she was seen as being not very feminine and that people expected her to always conform to that identity. She expressed how this might be limiting.

You can also get stuck outside of the box, because I wear a lot of jeans. On the first day of school I wore a skirt last year, and some people got really mad at me because I wore a skirt.

A girl from a different classroom discussed having a similar experience of feeling like she was expected to not do “feminine” things and that this expectation sometimes makes her hesitant about trying new things.

I’m kind of an “out of the box” sort of person and so if I want to do something that is more “inside the box,” like go shopping or something, my friends are kind of like “Whoa, that’s weird, you don’t usually do that.” So I think “okay, maybe I won’t.”

### *Consequences of Conformity or Nonconformity*

In addition to challenging the idea that most people fit into gender role stereotypes, a few students indicated that there may be drawbacks from

trying too hard to fit into these expectations. Students identified things they saw as potential consequences of conforming to stereotypes ( $N = 5$  references). For example, one girl said, “there is some stuff that people do to make themselves stay in the box, and it’s just like sometimes really bad for you, and you shouldn’t make those choices to stay in the box.” The students gave examples of going to extremes to fit the expectations of traditional gender stereotypes, such as, “Guys have to be really buff so they weight-train a lot and they can overdo their bodies and they can become really unhealthy just to look cool.” Another girl added, “some people don’t eat just to be skinny, there was this one girl that my friend was talking about and her boyfriend said that she was too fat and so she went anorexic.”

Although students extensively discussed ways in which the stereotypes did not fit for them or people they knew, they also talked about ways that they felt limited by them. Students disclosed that there were times they wanted to step outside of their gender role, but worried about the consequences. One girl discussed her experiences with sports.

In 5th grade I always used to see the boys playing football and my sister used to say that football was really fun because she used to play at recess and stuff but I was scared because I didn’t know how to play football and I didn’t want to make myself feel bad because I didn’t know how to play.

The students also realized that stepping outside of the gender box may be easier for some than for others. Although the students often endorsed messages that both boys and girls should be allowed to challenge gender stereotypes, one girl did recognize that perhaps gender norms are more rigid for boys than girls, noting, “It’s so weird ’cause some girls are boyish but boys are not girlish. It’s not popular for boys to be girlish.”

Students also described times when people were forced to act outside the stereotypes in order to amuse another person. One girl said,

My little cousin, he’s a boy, and he has an older sister, and I would go over to his house sometimes, I find him in tutus, kind of scary. And I dressed up my cousin when he was four years old in ballerina shoes and dresses and made him walk around the house. It was funny.

A different girl talked about her experience feeling embarrassed by being forced to dress in a nontraditional manner.

My brother didn't play with Barbie dolls, he was a really big tom boy, well he was a boy, he wore all these baggy pants, and so when I was little he wanted me to be like him, so he dressed me up, he put this weird hat on me, he put sunglasses on me, this big, big, big jersey that didn't fit on me, his baggy pants, and he made me walk down the stairs and show my mom, and he made me go to the store like that. Kind of embarrassing.

### *Fluidity of Gender Identity Development*

During the focus groups, the students discussed the fluidity and sometimes contradictory nature of gender identity development. Many recognized that it is possible for people to exhibit both gender stereotypical and nonstereotypical traits. When asked what he learned from being in the FAIR program, one boy said, "I learned that you could be in the box and out of the box at the same time." The students also recognized that one's gender identity may be a product of others' expectations, even when they have not consciously thought about these outside pressures. A boy described how one should be aware of what is influencing their sense of identity, saying, "Also check in with yourself and see if you are inside the box because of your friends or if it's what you really want to do."

The students also recognized that developing a gender identity is a process that changes over time. A female student described her transition from a "girly girl" to a tomboy and the way others responded to her based on her gender identity.

On my dad's side, all I have is boy cousins. I kind of get treated unfairly, but most of the time since I'm a tomboy now, they treat me better. But when I was younger I was more of a girly girl so they always were like "okay we're going to go sword fight with these metal things" and I would be like "okay well what could I do?" and they'd always be like "just go make us soup or something." Now that they know I was a tomboy, they treat me better.

### *The Value of Authenticity*

The concept of doing what you "want to do" or having a choice ( $N = 12$  references) about gender identity was a theme that all four focus groups discussed. For some, this included resisting the influences of others and focusing on one's own desires, exemplified with statements like, "Do what

you want to do, not what others think you should do.” Students also clarified that the option of choice should apply to themselves as well as others. When discussing what girls and boys are expected to do during gym class, one student remarked, “I think that they should give the girls a choice if they want to do what the boys are doing or not.” While many of the comments around choice and gender identity involved engaging in specific behaviors, such as playing with certain toys or participating in sports, some described this identity in more abstract and global terms, by saying things like, “It’s okay to be inside or outside of the box. You should pick which one is right for you.”

In some groups, the discussion regarding choice evolved into comments about authenticity ( $N = 5$ ) and how important it is for people to be true to themselves. For some, it was as simple as the message, “Just be yourself.” Other students asserted that if we focused more on authenticity, stereotypes would be unnecessary. One girl indicated that the lesson she would want everyone to take away from the program is “that you don’t really need to have stereotypes, you could just be yourself.” Finally one student recognized the freedom that could come with focusing on being true to oneself rather than trying to follow stereotypes, saying, “You don’t have to do what other people have to do. Just do what you like. If you think that what someone else is doing is fun, then you can do that.” Another student commented “Do what you want to do, not what others think you should do,” challenging directly the idea of making decisions based on pressure (real or perceived) from others.

## Discussion

The focus groups allowed researchers to examine the complexities of children’s gender identity in-depth. The children articulated the discrepancy between their own gender identity and gender role stereotypes and discussed consequences of nonconformity. They also placed value on the ability to have freedom of choice and to be authentic. Based on these findings, we argue that children’s gender identity development be viewed as a dynamic process in which children are active participants and that they place particular attention to the potential costs of not conforming to gender role norms.

Much of the discussion during the focus groups involved students providing examples of ways in which people did not conform to stereotypes about gender roles. These findings differ from the assertions of a developmental perspective, which suggests that by age 8 or 9, most children rate themselves as being consistent with gender-typed characteristics and do not challenge these stereotypes until adulthood. It may be that most of the usual discourse

with children about gender and most research involving children assumes that children will fit into such stereotypes and does not give students space to disagree.

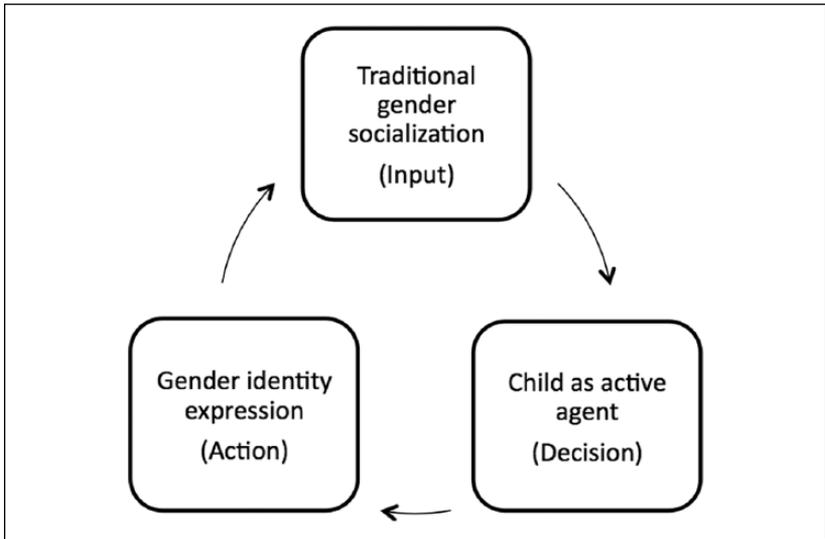
While many of the children presented examples of how they or others do not fit into traditional gender stereotypes, they also recognized that whether or not one challenges gender role stereotypes is a complex issue. The back and forth of the focus group discussion suggested that the children took a sort of “Goldilocks” approach to conformity to gender stereotypes—too much or too little is not good. The students appear to be aware that there are potential costs to not conforming to gender role expectations and may be making their decisions about how to express gender identity as part of a cost/benefit analysis. Additional research can further address the process by which children weigh these costs and benefits.

As active agents in their gender identity development process, we argue that children will attempt to balance the pressures of conforming (and risks of not conforming) against the benefits of being authentic to their sense of self. This balance may be more difficult for some children than others. Renold (2005) discusses how some children who are consistently marginalized continue to resist messages about gender norms and thus become “Others” who are willing to assert their differences.

Many students in this study commented on their desire to make their own choice about how to express their identity. They emphasized the importance of being true to oneself no matter the consequences. In fact, children who think they are only engaging in a behavior to avoid social costs may eventually decide that they like that behavior. Some research suggests that many children struggle with and against pressures to engage in normative gendered behavior (Renold, 2005). The fact that so many children resist or question gender norms (in part or more fully) suggests that children have a desire to be authentic but weigh this against the consequences of nonconformity.

### *Gender Identity Development as a Dynamic Negotiation Process*

We propose that children’s identity development and expression is a complex revolving input/decision/action process (see Figure 1). The input involves traditional socialization factors such as media and overt and covert messages from adults and peers. The input also includes experiences of gender prejudice or harassment or the threat of such experiences (sometimes through viewing others’ experiences of harassment). Children consider this input and weigh the costs and benefits of conforming or challenging traditional gender



**Figure 1.** Model of gender identity development demonstrating the input/decision/action process

norms. They also take into account their own sense of authenticity or preferences in a given situation. Based on these factors, children make decisions about how to express their gender identity. The child then receives a reaction from others about his or her gender identity expression, possibly including harassment or teasing, continues to receive messages from the media and role models, and the cycle continues as the child makes decisions based on the reactions to his or her gender identity expression.

We argue that children engage in this process continuously as they make decisions about identity expression. This process is contextually based and affected by the presence of others. When children are alone and the threat of gender prejudice or promise of rewards is removed, they may emphasize personal choice in their decision-making process over the cost/benefit analysis. Boys and girls often face gender prejudice for different reasons and thus might factor in this threat differently. Our findings suggest that at least some of the children are consciously aware of the limitations boys feel in regard to expressing feminine qualities. In contrast, girls at this age may engage in more nontraditional behaviors and might even identify as a “tomboy.” In fact, one girl discussed how her identity process of going from being a “girly girl” to being a “tomboy” meant that her male cousins treated her with more respect.

In addition, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, ability status, and other areas of identity will all influence this model. Children who are managing the threat of other types of prejudice (homophobia, classism, racism) in addition to gender prejudice may weigh the costs or benefits of conforming differently (Xiao, 2000).

Additionally, children vary in their amount of investment in social desirability and attention to social clues. For instance, research suggests that individuals who are especially concerned with social connectedness are more attentive to social cues (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). This suggests that for children who are more invested in belonging they may pay more attention to the threat of gender prejudice and adjust their behavior accordingly.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Our focus groups were conducted with a small number of children who predominantly identified as being White. This is a limitation of the current research as it is possible that children who experience marginalization as a result of their race/ethnicity may react differently to the pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. While we expect that most children will engage in similar processes (i.e., considering consequences of their behaviors, making conscious decisions about how to express their gender) experiences of racism likely are an additional factor that children of color must consider. Future research should explore the current model with students from a variety of racial/ethnic and nationality backgrounds. In fact, the authors are currently exploring how children at a predominantly African American school experience and conceptualize gender harassment and racial discrimination.

Furthermore, we conducted focus groups during which all children were encouraged to share, but some children were more vocal than others. It is possible that some children held views that differed with those of the more vocal children. We were also conducting the groups following an intervention designed to address gender prejudice and increase awareness of social justice issues. Therefore children may have felt pressure to tell us things that were aligned with the values of the program—although some did assert more traditional views. This presents a potential limitation to our study. While many of the children expressed challenging traditional gender roles and a desire to be authentic in their expression, we do not know the percentages of children who may be more likely to endorse traditional views or nontraditional views of gender identity. Future quantitative research would allow us to examine how

our model is expressed in greater numbers of children and assess the frequencies with which children endorse or challenge traditional gender ideologies. Larger scale studies would also allow for an exploration of individual differences in children that might influence their decision-making process. For example, some children may decide to be nonconforming in their gender expression, even in the face of gender harassment, while others adjust their (at least outwardly expressed) gender identity to appear more traditional in the hopes of decreasing such experiences.

Despite the limitations of this study, our findings contribute to the understanding of how children develop a gender identity, placing particular emphasis on some children's desire to resist stereotypes, the agency children have in this process, and the role that gender-based bullying plays. The qualitative nature of the study allowed us to explore in more detail the processes by which children develop gender identity and many factors that influence them. While we do not argue that all children experience this process in the same way or result in the same outcomes, we do believe that many children actively engage in developing, creating, and re-creating their gender identity. Our findings challenge models that assert a static and more simplistic developmental process. We hope that researchers, as well as educators and parents, find our model useful in understanding the complexity of the gender identity development process.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, we argue that children are active decision makers in a process of expressing their gender identity in which they weigh the benefits of authenticity against potential consequences of nonconformity. As children experience gender prejudice as a result of nonconformity (or witness others experiencing prejudice), they make decisions about whether and how to adjust their gender identity and may attempt to integrate the feedback into their sense of identity, hide aspects of their selves from others, or challenge (or consider challenging) the prejudice and resist changing who they are as an individual.

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## Author Biographies

**Britney G Brinkman**, PhD is an Assistant Professor of Counseling Psychology at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her research interests include better understanding how people's social identities (such as gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation) influence their life experiences and exploring what factors influence people's involvement in activism, advocacy and social change work. She is particularly interested in promoting social justice through the development, implementation and assessment of community based prevention and intervention programs and improving pedagogical and research methods that address social justice issues.

**Kelly L. Rabenstein** is a graduate student in Counseling Psychology at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her research interests include exploring gender identity and developing effective methods to measure identity development.

**Lee A. Rosén**, PhD is a Professor of Counseling Psychology at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. His research interests include child psychopathology and child psychotherapy.

**Toni S. Zimmerman**, PhD is a Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Director of the Marriage and Family Graduate Program at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. Her research interests include assisting young people to understand the importance of equality and diversity early in their lives. She and her colleagues have developed several curriculums including FAIR, RELATE, and PEACE. These are intended for use with preschool through high school students and can be used in both counseling and teaching settings.