A b i g a i l   C .   S a g u y
J u l i e t   A .   W i l l i a m s

Reimagining Gender: *Gender Neutrality* in the News

I n recent decades, feminist, gay and lesbian, and transgender rights activists have advocated for gender-neutral approaches in arenas ranging from parenting to pronoun usage to public restrooms. The emergence of *gender neutral* as a key concept in gender politics can be traced to the 1970s. Early in the decade, Shulamith Firestone proclaimed that "the end goal of feminist revolution must be . . . not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself" (1970, 19). Amid radical feminists' exploration of "ungendered utopias" (Merck 2010) and other, more mainstream efforts to reimagine gender relations—such as the 1974 release of *Free To Be . . . You and Me*—the term *gender neutral* first entered legal and popular discourse. In 1976, the term appeared in a Supreme Court decision, *General Electric v. Gilbert*, ruling that an employee disability plan that excluded pregnancy as a covered condition did not constitute sex discrimination. Meanwhile, antifeminist activist Phyllis Schlafly warned that "the Equal Rights proponents . . . want to reconstruct us into a gender-free society, so there's no difference between men and women. I don't think babies need two sex-neutral parents. I think they need a father and a mother" (*Time* 1977). With unabashed alarm, Schlafly conjured images not only of women fighting on the front lines of war but also of same-sex marriages and co-ed public restrooms (Mansbridge 1986).

Today, military combat roles are open to women, same-sex marriage is a constitutional right, and all-gender restrooms are proliferating—shifts indicating victory in the campaign for a more gender-neutral society, if not for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) itself. Surprisingly, however, the con-

cept of gender neutrality has yet to receive sustained treatment in theoretical or empirical research. The present study examines different usages and meanings ascribed to the term *gender neutral* in news reports over time to elucidate how this multifaceted ideal challenges the gender binary and the omnirelevance of gender in everyday life.

Despite prominent usage of the term *gender neutral* in the law and in activist discourse since the 1970s, the concept has been almost entirely overlooked in scholarship on both feminist theory and politics and also in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) theory and politics—the latter of which has developed largely independently from feminist theory and politics despite common roots in challenging dominant gender ideologies.[1] This is the first study to examine popular usage of the term *gender neutral*. We investigate two interrelated questions: first, in what contexts has *gender neutral* been invoked in popular discourse? And second, what meanings are conveyed by the term? To capture popular discursive usages of the term *gender neutral*, we analyze a sample drawn from four different mainstream newspapers, collectively spanning a forty-year period. We identify three distinct ways of framing gender neutrality—as *degendering*, *androgyny*, or *gender inclusivity*. Our analyses consider the relationship between various meanings and different identity categories—including those based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity—associated with the term *gender neutral*. We further consider how these distinct meanings map onto what scholars have called "redoing" or "undoing gender" (Risman 2009; West and Zimmerman 2009).

Reimagining gender

What does it mean to call something *gender neutral*? Gender-neutral job titles like *firefighter*—in lieu of *fireman*—downplay gender distinctions. Gender-neutral restrooms create spaces that welcome people who identify outside of the gender binary. In fundamentally different ways, gender-neutral job titles and gender-neutral bathrooms challenge two enduring aspects of gender systems over time: first, the omnirelevance of gender in everyday life, and second, a binary account of gender. As Harold Garfinkel observed in his classic case study, "the omnirelevance of sexual statuses to affairs of daily life [is] an invariant but unnoticed background in the texture of relevances that comprise the changing actual scenes of everyday life" (1967, 118). As has been elaborated in other works, socially recognized gender statuses have been defined within a binary gender model.[2]

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[1] However, see Fineman (1983, 1992), MacKinnon (1987), Bem (1993), Appleton (2005), and Draz (2017).

[2] See Lorber (1994), Lucal (1999), Butler (2004), and Serano (2013).

If *gender neutral* is a catchall term used to designate different ways of challenging the gender system, the term also gestures at heterogeneous alternatives. Our analyses of usages of *gender neutral* in the news offer new insight into how key aspects of the social organization of gender have been contested and reimagined during a critical period of social movement activism and legal changes related to sex equality, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Specifically, this study both draws on and advances current theoretical understanding of *doing gender*. In a canonical article published over three decades ago, Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) conceptualize gender not as an ascribed characteristic but rather as something people *do*, an accomplishment produced through interactions. Depending on one's ascribed sex category, people are expected to perform gender as either women or men (West and Zimmerman 2009). West and Zimmerman (2009, 116) call this "*accountability to sex category membership*" and argue that it is "the key to understanding gender's doing." Importantly, West and Zimmerman (1987, 146) identify how gender operates as a hierarchy so that, "in doing gender, men are also doing dominance and women are doing deference."

In recent years, there has been growing interest in theoretical and empirical investigation of the possibilities for redoing and undoing gender.[3] Scholars debate whether it is possible to eradicate gender entirely as a reference point in social interaction (West and Zimmerman 2009). This literature leads us to consider whether different gender-neutral practices are best understood as reworking or, rather, overcoming the binary gender system. By analyzing discussions of gender neutrality in the news, we can identify how news reporting uses the term *gender neutral* to designate efforts both to undo and to redo gender. We further consider the extent to which news reports on gender neutrality treat the issues of gender equality, lesbian and gay rights, and transgender rights as inextricably linked—as antifeminists like Schlafly have—or, alternatively, as separate struggles. Moreover, we examine whether distinct meanings of gender neutrality are associated with discussions of specific groups and issues. This analysis thereby elucidates the concept of gender neutrality while also generating new empirical evidence that advances theoretical understanding of undoing and redoing gender.

Framing gender neutrality

While not a mirror of social reality, news reports provide examples of the use of the term *gender neutrality*, albeit filtered through the biases and preferences of journalists and editors. News reporting is important to study because it represents "a dominant force in the public construction of common

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[3] See Butler (2004), Lorber (2005), Deutsch (2007), Risman (2009), and Connell (2010).

Table 1. Gender Neutrality Frames

	Meaning of *Gender Neutral*	Goal	How It Works
Degendering	Genderless; not gender specific	Deemphasizing gender	Removes gender-specific references and labels and replaces them with terms that are not gender specific
Androgyny	Combining masculine and feminine elements	Freeing people from limiting gender stereotypes	Encourages gender nonconforming behavior
Gender inclusivity	Recognizing multiple gender identities	Including people of all genders	Mentions a previously excluded group or introduces additional gender categories or options

experience and popular sense of what is real and important" (Schudson 2003, 13). As such, it is a powerful yet underutilized sociological data source. On its own, news media analysis cannot capture how individual readers understand specific stories, nor can it deduce the institutional or organizational factors that shape news reporting. It can, however, reveal contexts in which a specific term such as *gender neutral* is used, which identity categories are typically associated with it, whether connections among different usages are drawn, and whether the term is framed in different or similar ways when associated with various identity categories.

To understand usage of the term *gender neutral* in the news, we draw on the concept of framing, defined as selecting "*some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described" (Entman 1993, 52). Different frames emanate from distinct visions of social justice, producing contrasting understandings and competing recommendations for future action.[4]

Below, we describe three gender-neutrality frames, identified through an inductive and reiterative process of reading news articles and scholarly works that discuss alternative gender systems.[5] Table 1 summarizes these frames—*degendering*, *androgyny*, and *gender inclusivity*. Within each, *gender neutral* implies a commitment to distinct reform strategies and to different visions of an ideal gender order.

[4] See Spector and Kitsuse (1977), Gusfield (1981), Snow et al. (1986), and Best (2008).
[5] See Firestone (1970), Bem (1974), Rubin (1975), Lorber (1994), and Currah, Juang, and Minter (2006).

Gender neutrality as degendering

Feminist sociologist Judith Lorber uses the term *degendering* to describe practices that "weaken gender's power over our lives . . . by not gendering in the first place"—a goal Lorber promotes because she views the categories "masculine" and "feminine" as inextricably tied to gender hierarchy (2005, xiv; see also Messner 2011). Following Lorber, when *gender neutral* is used to refer to a practice that unmarks gender to diminish its social relevance, we call this the *degendering frame*. Replacing *mankind* with *humankind* or *stewardess* with *flight attendant* are examples of gender neutrality as degendering. To take another example, after the US Supreme Court ruled that people have the constitutional right to marry someone of the same sex, states replaced gendered marriage licenses—referring to *husband* and *wife*—with gender-neutral ones, mentioning instead *spouse 1* and *spouse 2.*

Gender neutrality as degendering heralds a world in which gender is de-emphasized. As such, it can be construed as an example of undoing gender. Our invocation of the term *undoing gender* here is attentive to West and Zimmerman's (2009, 117) insistence that undoing gender implies not merely a "change in the normative conceptions" of gender, but an "abandonment" of gender in the sense that "sex category . . . is no longer something to which we are accountable (i.e. that it makes no difference)." Within their framework, gender neutrality as degendering interrupts or suspends the ordinary process of gender accountability. Gender traditionalists' rejection of gender neutrality has presumed a degendering frame, as when Schlafly (1994, 71) incredulously asked, "do [feminists] really want a totally neutral society in which we are all forced to pretend there is no difference between men and women?"

Gender neutrality as androgyny

The term *gender neutral* is not only used to designate practices that diminish the salience of gender in social life. First released in 1972, the album *Free to Be . . . You and Me* promoted the message that anyone—boy or girl—can achieve anything, regardless of gender stereotypes. While seeking to make gender a less prescriptive factor in child rearing, nonsexist parenting advocates did not uniformly endorse eradication of the binary gender system. Instead, many aspired to a world in which boys and girls would be "free to be" as masculine or as feminine as they liked. Hence, rather than dressing children in clothing lacking in obviously gendered significance, children were encouraged to dress in overalls or tutus—or both—as they wished, with no expectation of fixed preferences over time. And rather than giving children toys that were neither "boy toys" nor "girl toys," parents encouraged all children to play with "boy toys" and "girl toys" as the desire struck them, regardless of their assigned sex (Gould 1972; Thomas 1974; Greenberg 1978). Contemporary an-

alysts identify this period as a precursor of the gender-neutral parenting movement (Martin 2005; Rotskoff and Lovett 2012).

Following psychologist Sandra Bem (1974), we refer to this version of gender neutrality—gender nonconformity within a binary gender system—as the *androgyny frame*. This frame is premised on the idea that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive but rather represent distinct elements that can be mixed and matched. Bem (1974, 155) argues that "many individuals might be *both* masculine and feminine, *both* assertive and yielding, *both* instrumental and expressive—depending on the situational appropriateness of these various behaviors." Androgyny has not been strongly associated with social movement activism. The androgyny frame of gender neutrality appears, however, in discussions of fashion, as in this 2014 *New York Times* article on shoe companies: "Puma appears to be going for an odd, gender-neutral sort of statement. Its new line features a design in which one shoe in each pair is pink while the other is blue" (Borden 2014, ST10). As this example illustrates, gender neutrality as androgyny can be understood as one version of redoing gender, shifting normative conceptions of socially appropriate gender displays without abandoning—or even downplaying—the relevance of gender in everyday social interaction.

Gender neutrality as gender inclusivity

In what we call the *gender inclusivity* frame, the term *gender neutral* describes social practices that recognize identities previously marginalized or erased altogether. For example, this frame is implied when the *gender-neutral restroom* label designates additional accommodations provided alongside traditional options (Beemyn 2005; Sanders and Stryker 2016). Gender neutrality as gender inclusivity does not imply—as degendering does—that gender-neutral restrooms should supplant sex-segregated restrooms or that gender-neutral pronouns (such as the singular they/them or ze/hir/hirs) should replace gendered pronouns. Rather, the gender inclusivity frame strives to create more options from which individuals may choose. And whereas the androgyny frame underscores the importance of liberating people of *both* sexes from restrictive gender role expectations, the gender inclusivity frame can be used to emphasize the need to recognize people of *all* genders—including those whose gender identity does not correspond with their assigned sex at birth and those who identify as neither male nor female.

Gender neutrality as gender inclusivity offers another example of redoing gender, one that works by affirming and expanding available categories of gender identity without directly challenging the imperative of gender accountability itself. An early example of the gender inclusivity frame can be found in efforts to replace the universal *he* with *he or she*, or with the neolo-

gism *s/he*. *S/he* is gender neutral but not in the same way as having one universal singular pronoun would be. *S/he* achieves gender neutrality through an act of recognition that explicitly marks a previously unmarked group—women and girls—previously subsumed by a gendered universal. While the *s/he* example points to the longer history of the gender inclusivity frame, more recently this frame is most associated with transgender rights activism.

Analyzing *gender neutrality* in the news

This study examines the extent to which the news media associate these three distinct frames with gender equality between women and men, gay and lesbian rights, and transgender rights, respectively—and the extent to which these specific issues are treated as part of a common struggle or in isolation. To this end, we draw on quantitative and qualitative analyses of 959 news articles, op-eds, letters to the editor, and book reviews published in four leading news publications that include the terms *gender neutral/neutrality* or *sex neutral/neutrality* anywhere in the text. (We use the phrase "the term *gender neutral*" as shorthand for all permutations.) Our news sample includes all articles published in the *New York Times* since 1851 that include our search terms. Of the total number of articles in this sample, 490 were published between April 11, 1976 (the first time that any of our search terms appear in the *New York Times*) and December 31, 2016. Among those articles, 447 were published since January 1, 1987. The *New York Times* is widely recognized as the US newspaper of record, most read by journalists (Weaver et al. 2007), and most influential over other news outlets (Danielian and Reese 1989). The *New York Times* is maintaining its influence even with the rise of social media (Meraz 2009).

To be able to generalize beyond the *New York Times*, we expanded our sample—using the news database NewsBank—to include a wider range of newspapers. The remaining 469 news articles were published between January 1, 1987, and December 31, 2016, in *USA Today* ($N = 183$), the *San Francisco Chronicle* ($N = 182$), and the *Christian Science Monitor* ($N = 104$). Our expanded newspaper search extends back only to 1987, as this is the first year in which we have access to continuous coverage for all four publications. Because our university's subscription to NewsBank does not include *Christian Science Monitor* articles published in 1991, we used Lexis-Nexis for that year and publication only.

With nine undergraduate research assistants, we coded each full article—using Google Forms—for whether it framed gender neutrality as degendering, androgyny, or gender inclusivity, as defined above. In the Google form, we assigned a 1 to a given article if a specific frame was present and a 0 if it was

not. This numerical coding allowed us subsequently to quantitatively analyze the patterns across all articles. For instance, we coded a 2006 article reporting that an elementary school in Oakland uses "a gender-neutral vocabulary" and urges teachers "to line up students by sneaker color rather than by gender" (Brown 2006) as 1 for degendering, as these practices represent efforts to downplay gender distinctions. A 2005 article describing "two new satellite campuses, to open in 2007 . . . with men's, women's and gender-neutral bathrooms on every floor of the buildings" (Brown 2005) was coded as 1 for gender inclusivity, since the gender-neutral bathrooms represented additional options—rather than replacements—for gender-specific restrooms. A 2015 article from the *Christian Science Monitor* provides an example of the androgyny frame when discussing the "widespread theory . . . that Minions were gender neutral, since they don both traditionally male and female attire" (Kauffman 2015). Here, *gender neutral* is used to describe clothing that combines typically masculine and feminine elements. The frame variables allow us to track the relative frequency of different usages of the term *gender neutral* and to determine whether the meaning of the term changes depending upon the group or issue with which it is associated.

In addition to the frames, we coded for over sixty other discrete variables. Unless otherwise specified, articles were coded as 1 when the element was mentioned and as 0 when it was not. We developed our variables based on important concepts and themes that emerged from our reading of news articles and scholarship on gender theory and politics. To capture associations in the news between the term *gender neutral* and issues related to gender equality between men and women, we coded for mention of gender equality, gender roles, gender/sex discrimination, sexism, feminism, the ERA, gender equality in religion, and women in combat. Articles that explicitly discuss equality between men and women were coded 1 for *gender_equality*.[6] *Gender_roles* refers to mention of cultural expectations regarding how people should think, speak, dress, and interact based on being either male or female. In contrast, *gender_sex_discrimination* refers to the concepts of unfairness and barriers to opportunity in a legal context. *Sexism* refers to an ideology that presumes women's inferiority to men. Any articles that mention individual feminists, women's rights organizations, or feminism as an ideology were coded 1 for *feminism*.

While our coding schema made fine-grained distinctions between such concepts as gender equality, sexism, sex discrimination, gender roles, and feminism, we also wanted to capture broader trends in the data. To be able to measure whether our news sample treated the issue of gender equality between

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[6] The italics and underscore are used to indicate a variable name.

women and men in isolation from LGBT issues or whether the issue of gender equality between women and men was associated with the degendering frame, we used the statistical software program STATA to create a composite variable *gender_equality_broad*. This variable was 1 if any of the following variables were coded as 1: *gender_equality*, *gender_roles*, *gender_sex_discrimination*, *feminism*, *ERA*, *gender_equality_religion*, *women_combat*, or *sexism*. Use of this variable, which lumps together several variables, further increases the reliability of our data (Krippendorff 2004).

To capture associations between issues related to sexual orientation and the term *gender neutral*, we coded for discussion of sexual orientation, homophobic discrimination, same-sex marriage, and LGB rights. *Homophobic_discrimination* refers not only to workplace discrimination but also to discussions of heterosexism and bullying of lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth. While lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights are often lumped together within the label LGBT, we purposefully coded separately for mention of LGB and transgender issues so that we could determine empirically the extent to which these two sets of issues were discussed together or in isolation and the extent to which each was discussed along with the issue of gender equality between women and men. Coding specifically for LGB issues also allowed us to assess whether certain gender-neutrality frames were more common in articles discussing issues related to sexual orientation. To answer these questions, in STATA we created a composite variable *lgb_broad*. This frame was coded 1 if any of the following variables were coded 1: *sexual_orientation*, *homophobic_discrimination*, *same_sex_marriage*, or *lgb_rights*.

To capture associations between issues related to gender identity and the term *gender neutral*, we coded for mention of transgender, transgender rights or activism, and raising children described as transgender. *Transgender_rights* refers specifically to legal rights for people identified as transgender or discussions of social mobilization around gaining such rights. To be able to measure whether the news sample discussed transgender issues in isolation from the issues of gender equality between women and men or from LGB issues or if our news sample associated transgender issues with gender inclusivity, we generated the variable *trans_broad*. This variable was coded 1 when *transgender*, *raising_transgender_kids*, or *trans_rights* was 1.

We also coded for variables that we expected to cross specific identity categories, including gender nonconformity and performance of masculinity or femininity. *Gender_nonconformity* refers specifically to behavior or gender expression that does not match social expectations based on a person's sex category, whereas *mascfem_perform* refers to discussion of the idea that people perform masculinity or femininity through interaction. In addition, we coded articles for any mention of *intersex*—an identity category that we had thought

might be associated with gender neutrality but ultimately came up rarely. Finally, legal scholars have commented on parallels between gender neutrality and "colorblindness" in the law (Mayeri 2011, 6), and we wanted to see if these ideas were closely associated in nonlegal settings as well. To this end, we coded for specific mention of race neutrality or colorblindness.[7]

To identify the articles, we recorded the title, year, date, author, and URL. We also coded each article for the decade in which it was published to allow us to examine statistically significant differences in reporting by decade. For accountability purposes, the coding form included a text box where coders each recorded their initials. To be able to examine differences in content by article type, we coded for type of article (op-ed, letter to the editor, standard article, other, or nonrelevant). If—and only if—one of the authors confirmed that a given article coded as nonrelevant was indeed nonrelevant, we eliminated it from the sample. These articles are not included in our final *N* reported above.

To achieve high intercoder reliability, we chose to code for the simple presence or absence of an element rather than asking coders to assess each variable's significance or degree of emphasis within the article; readers should

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[7] We cast our net widely when developing variables. This produced some redundancy and a longer list of variables than is possible to explore within a single article. For our analysis, we created composite variables, described above. The variable *spaces_welcoming_to_transgender_people* overlapped entirely with the variable *transgender* and is thus not examined independently. A pair of variables—*mens_rights* and *paternity_rights*—is not analyzed here because it is not relevant to the specific focus of this article. Likewise, we do not analyze here other variables that capture specific issues, including consumer products for both men/boys and women/girls, spaces welcoming of both men/boys and women/girls, family leave, domestic work, child rearing of cis boys and girls, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993, the album *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, drag queens or drag kings, gender-neutral language, legislation, restrooms, college dormitories, race, racism, race discrimination, and race equality. Note we do analyze the variable for race neutrality/colorblindness. We also coded for whether or not a photo was present in the article and provided a text box for coders to describe the photo. The data about photos, however, proved unreliable, as the databases we used did not consistently provide a photo even when one had been part of the original article. We coded articles for whether the following regions or countries were mentioned (coded 1) or were the main focus of the article (coded 2): Scandinavia, Sweden, England, Germany, Spain, Australia, India, Other. We initially expected to find frequent reference to Scandinavia and Sweden in our news sample, given how gender scholars have historically held up this region and country as a model for gender neutrality (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2006). We were also interested to see how our sample discussed other countries. Ultimately, however, our sample overwhelmingly focused on the United States, and no clear patterns emerged from the country variables. We also coded for but do not analyze here categories of people quoted in the article—including social scientist, life scientist, social activist, politician, judge, doctor, lawyer or law professor, parent of gender-nonconforming child, and person identifying as gender nonconforming.

bear this in mind when evaluating our findings. Variables are not mutually exclusive; a given article could be coded 1 on several variables. We also included several text boxes on our coding form. For example, one text box asked the coder to provide a summary of the article, while another asked the coder to comment on how the article discussed our search terms. In a third text box, the coder was instructed to copy and paste all usages of the search terms in the article. The authors later qualitatively analyzed all of the summaries and quotations. These qualitative analyses supplement the discussion of the quantitative analysis.

In the first rounds of coding, two coders coded every article, referred to as double coding. In weekly meetings, we discussed coding discrepancies, arrived at consensus when possible, and added more detailed guidance to the codebook—or list of variables and instructions for coding—where necessary. As consistency across coders increased, we progressively reduced double coding to 10 percent. Calculated as the number of substantive codes for which there was agreement, divided by the total number of substantive codes, average intercoder reliability ranged from 94 to 99 percent. The Krippendorf Alpha, a statistical measure that controls for the likelihood of agreeing by chance, was 0.817 for the single variables as a whole and 0.92 for the variables for the frames specifically, giving us confidence in the quality of our data (Krippendorff 2004).

To test whether there were statistically significant differences in reporting— between articles published in different decades, between articles published in different publications, or in articles that mention versus do not mention sexual orientation or gender identity—we computed Fisher's exact tests of statistical significance, a statistical test that estimates the likelihood that an observed difference was due to chance. Unless otherwise mentioned, all p values are based on two-sided Fisher's exact tests.

News media analysis

As we discuss below, our news sample mentions gender neutrality in association with gender equality between women and men from the earliest to the most recent articles. In contrast, mention of gay and lesbian rights and transgender rights in association with gender neutrality is more recent. Moreover, as we will see, our news sample tends to discuss gender equality in relative isolation from sexual orientation and gender identity, while the latter often are discussed together. One possible explanation for these patterns of association, which we explore in more detail below, is that gender neutrality tends to be framed differently depending on which identity categories and issues are being discussed.

Identity categories and issues associated with gender neutrality

From the first mention of *gender neutral* in the *New York Times* sample, the term has consistently been associated with discussions of gender equality between women and men. From 1976 until 1986, 81 percent of the *New York Times* sample discusses gender neutrality in association with gender equality issues. Since 1987, gender equality between women and men is mentioned in 61 percent of the *New York Times* sample and 55 percent of the broader sample.

Notably, in 1976, the first year the *New York Times* uses the term *gender neutral*, sexual orientation is mentioned in an article about the ERA, which notes fears that the ERA would usher in "homosexual marriage" as one reason it faced opposition (Lear 1976, 31). The next appearance of the composite variable for lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues in the *New York Times* sample is in 1987, after which it comes up in every year but four in the *New York Times* sample, and in every year but two in the broader sample. For 1987–2016 as a whole, this composite variable is present in 23 percent of the broader sample.

The first publication in our *New York Times* sample that was coded as 1 for the composite transgender variable—in 1985—does not actually discuss experiences of people identifying as transgender. Rather, it evokes a hypothetical "transvestite" to poke fun at the idea that the pronoun *he* refers equally to women and men.

> Knowing that he and his can be gender neutral, I shall no longer feel there is an odd image filtering through something like: "The average American needs the small routines of getting ready for work. As he shaves or blow-dries his hair or pulls on his panty hose, he is easing himself by small stages into the demands of the day." The pronouns he and his, of course, do duty for either male or female without prejudice, and we need not resort to awkward he/she flip-flops to ward off the suggestion that our average American is a transvestite. (Adendyck 1985)

The composite variable for transgender issues does not make another appearance in association with the term *gender neutral* until 1994 and does not become a common occurrence until 2004. From 1987–2016, the composite variable for transgender issues appears in 14 percent of the full sample.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of mention of the composite variables *gender_equality_broad*, *lgb_broad*, and *trans_broad* as a proportion of all reporting by decade for all four publications—including *New York Times* articles published before 1987—and provides *p* values, which show the statistical likelihood that an observed difference was the product of chance. The variable *gender_equality_broad* is present in 80 percent of our news sample
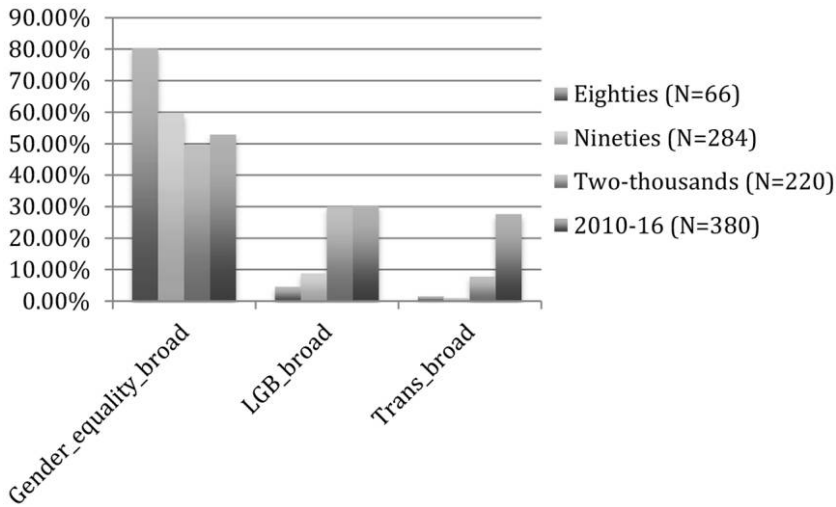
Figure 1 Mention of Different Rights Claims by Decade, 1987–2016. The frequency of reporting was statistically significantly different—compared to the other decades as a whole—for *gender_equality_broad* in the 1980s ($p < .001$) and 2000s ($p < .05$) and for both *lgb_broad* and *trans_broad* in the 1980s ($p < .001$ and $p < .005$, respectively), 1990s ($p < .001$), 2000s ($p < .005$ and $p < .01$, respectively), and 2010–16 ($p < .001$).

from the 1980s, compared to 60 percent in the 1990s, 50 percent in the first decade of the 2000s, and 53 percent in 2010–16. Compared to the other decades as a whole, the frequency of this variable is significantly greater in the 1980s and significantly smaller in the first decade of the 2000s. In contrast, the frequency of the variable *lgb_broad* increases over time from 4.5 percent in the 1980s, to 9 percent in the 1990s, to 30 percent in both first decade of the 2000s and in 2010–16. The frequency of the variable *trans_broad* increases from next to nothing in the 1980s and 1990s to 8 percent in the first decade of the 2000s and 28 percent in 2010–16. *Lgb_broad* and *trans-broad* were significantly less likely to be mentioned in the 1980s and 1990s, compared to the other decades as a whole, and significantly more likely to be mentioned in the 2000s and in 2010–16, compared to the other decades as a whole.

These findings demonstrate that while the term *gender neutral* has maintained a consistently strong association with issues of equality between men and women over time, the term increasingly has been associated additionally with gay rights and—more recently—with transgender rights. In contrast, mention of intersex people comes up only four times in the sample—in 2001, 2008, 2013, and 2016. The increased number of articles published in the *New York Times* sample beginning in the 1990s suggests that, rather than seeing the association of gender neutrality with gender equality supplanted by the association of gender neutrality with LGBT issues, we are witnessing a broaden-

ing of discussions of gender neutrality to include not only issues related to traditional understandings of gender equality but also to issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.[8]

Mentions of race neutrality or colorblindness are rare in our sample, with only 31 articles, or 3 percent of the sample, using these terms. These sporadic mentions are scattered over time rather than clustered in any particular decade. While the courts have tended to "reason from race" in sex discrimination cases by drawing analogies between racism and sexism (Mayeri 2011)—and while many legal scholars reject the principle of gender neutrality precisely because they liken it to race neutrality or colorblindness—we found that the news media has discussed gender neutrality largely in isolation from race neutrality. Articles that mentioned both race and gender neutrality typically use these terms as a pair, as in a 1996 article reporting accusations that opposition to affirmative action rests on the false belief "that we have somehow achieved a color-blind or a gender-neutral society" (Freedberg 1996).

Sexism, sexual orientation, and gender identity in the news

The fact that news articles mention multiple identity categories in association with the term *gender neutral* suggests that there may be shared interests across different identity groups in challenging prevailing gender practices. These common interests are further indicated by the fact that our news sample often discusses sexual orientation and gender identity together. Tables 2 and 3 provide the proportions of each subsample, mentioning various topics and the *p* value for differences across subsamples. As tables 2 and 3 show, articles that discuss sexual orientation are significantly more likely than those that do not to also mention gender identity and transgender rights. Likewise, articles discussing gender identity are significantly more likely to discuss sexual orientation, homophobic discrimination, and gay rights.

In contrast, articles in our sample tend to lose sight of sexism in discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity. As is shown in tables 2 and 3, articles mentioning either sexual orientation or gender identity are significantly *less* likely to discuss sexism. Articles discussing gender identity are also signif-

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[8] There are a few significant differences across publications from 1987 to 2016 . Articles in the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor* are significantly more likely ($p < .05$) to discuss *gender_equality_broad*, compared to articles published in the two other publications as a whole. In contrast, the *San Francisco Chronicle* articles are significantly *less* likely ($p < .001$) to discuss *gender_equality_broad* and are significantly more likely ($p < .001$) to discuss *lgb_broad*. *USA Today* is significantly less likely ($p < .05$) than the other publications as a whole to mention *lgb_broad*.

Table 2. Discussion of Topics by Mention or No Mention of Sexual Orientation, 1987–2016

	Mention Sexual Orientation	No Mention	Difference
Gender nonconformity	.28	.07	.21***
Gender performance	.12	.06	.06*
Gender identity	.42	.07	.35***
Transgender rights	.31	.05	.25***
Sexism	.04	.10	−.06*
Degendering frame	.70	.85	−.15***
Gender inclusivity frame	.28	.10	.18***

* *p* < .05.
*** *p* < .001.

icantly less likely to mention gender equality or feminism. These patterns demonstrate that articles in which the term *gender neutral* appears rarely analyze homophobia or transphobia *as* sexism or acknowledge sexism in the lives of gay, lesbian, and transgender people (Serano 2007; Bettcher 2014).

   We had expected discussions of gender nonconformity and gender performance to span across articles about gender equality between women and men, sexual orientation, and transgender issues, since both feminist and LGBTQ theory address these concepts. We found, however, that mention of gender nonconformity and gender performance is most likely in articles discussing sexual orientation, transgender issues, or both. As seen in table 2, compared

Table 3. Discussion of Topics by Mention or No Mention of Gender Identity, 1987–2016

	Mention Gender Identity	No Mention	Difference
Gender nonconformity	.46	.05	.41***
Gender performance	.15	.06	.09**
Sexual orientation	.53	.11	.42***
Homophobic discrimination	.18	.08	.10**
LGB rights	.36	.10	.26***
Sexism	.01	.11	−.11**
Gender equality	.15	.25	−.10*
Feminism	.10	.17	−.07* (1-sided)
Degendering frame	.46	.88	.42***
Gender inclusivity frame	.63	.06	.57***

* *p* < .05.
** *p* < .01.
*** *p* < .001.

to articles not mentioning sexual orientation, those that do mention it are significantly more likely to discuss gender nonconformity and gender performance. Likewise, as shown in table 3, compared to articles not mentioning gender identity, articles that mention gender identity are significantly more likely to discuss gender nonconformity and gender performance. More frequent discussion of gender nonconformity and gender performance among articles discussing either sexual orientation or gender identity suggests that, in our sample, these themes are strongly associated with sexual minorities and transgender people, despite their relevance for people of all sexual orientations and genders.

Comparing gender neutrality frames

Eighty-three percent of the full sample since 1987 frames gender neutrality as *degendering*, 5 percent as *androgyny*, and 13 percent as *gender inclusivity*. These patterns are remarkably consistent across the four publications. There are only three (barely) statistically significant differences across the publications. First, *San Francisco Chronicle* articles are significantly *less* likely to frame gender neutrality as degendering and *more* likely ($p < .05$, 1-sided) to frame it as gender inclusivity, compared to the other publications as a whole. In contrast, *USA Today* articles are significantly *more* likely ($p < .05$) to frame gender neutrality as degendering and *less* likely ($p < .05$) to frame it as gender inclusivity. Seventy-eight percent of *San Francisco Chronicle* articles frame gender neutrality as degendering, compared to 90 percent of *USA Today* articles. Conversely, 18 percent of *San Francisco Chronicle* articles frame gender neutrality as gender inclusivity, compared to 8 percent of *USA Today* articles.

Differences by decade are more striking. As is shown in figure 2, which provides *p* values for statistically significant differences, the likelihood that articles in our news sample discuss gender neutrality as degendering decreases over time. Specifically, compared to the other decades as a whole, articles published in the 1980s and 1990s are significantly more likely to frame gender neutrality as degendering, whereas articles published in 2010–16 are significantly less likely to do so. Likewise, our news sample is more likely over time to frame gender neutrality as gender inclusivity and—to a lesser extent—androgyny. Specifically, compared to the other decades as a whole, articles published in the 1990s are significantly *less* likely to frame gender neutrality as gender inclusivity. Articles published in 2010–16 are significantly *more likely* to frame gender neutrality as gender inclusivity and as androgyny.

As the most commonly occurring frame, degendering is discussed in relation to sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity. However, this frame comes up less frequently in articles that discuss either sexual orientation or
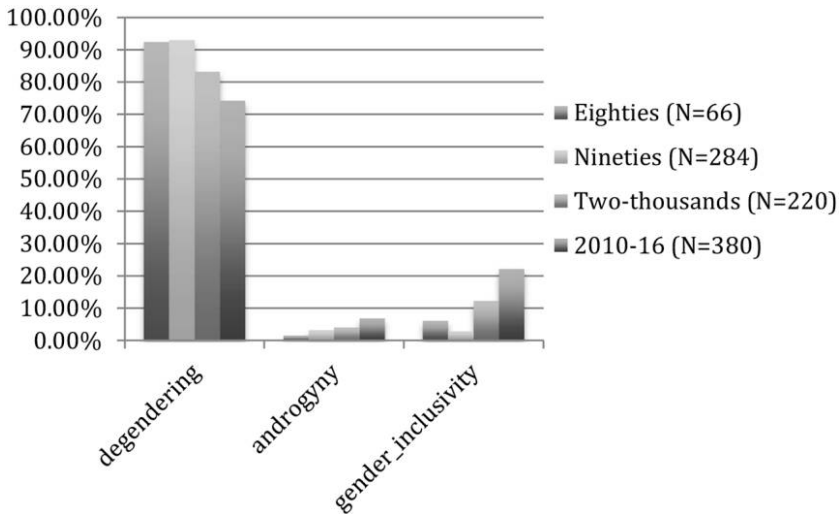
Figure 2 Use of Different Gender-Neutrality Frames by Decade, 1987–2016. The frequency of reporting was statistically significantly different—compared to the other decades as a whole—for degendering in the 1980s ($p < .05$), 1990s ($p < .001$), and in 2010–16 ($p < .001$); for androgyny in 2010–16 ($p < .05$); and for gender inclusivity in the 1990s ($p < .001$) and in 2010–16 ($p < .001$).

gender identity, compared to articles that do not discuss these topics. In the full sample, 83 percent of articles frame gender neutrality as degendering, 13 percent frame it as gender inclusivity, and 5 percent frame it as androgyny. In comparison, in the subsample of articles mentioning sexual orientation, 70 percent frame gender neutrality as degendering, 28 percent frame it as gender inclusivity, and 5 percent frame it as androgyny. Among the subsample of articles discussing gender identity, 46 percent frame gender neutrality as degendering, 63 percent frame it as gender inclusivity, and 5 percent frame it as androgyny. As tables 2 and 3 show, statistically, articles that mention either sexual orientation or gender identity are significantly *less* likely to use the degendering frame while being significantly *more* likely to use the gender inclusivity frame.

Qualitative analyses of all usages of the term *gender neutral* and of coder comments on the quotations yielded examples both of support for and opposition to gender neutrality. That is, rather than suggesting a consensus, our sample uncovered a range of conflicting attitudes about current gender arrangements, as well as multiple, distinct visions of possible alternatives. For example, a 2001 opinion piece published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* provides a celebratory account of *gender neutral* as degendering: "Already the word 'housewife' carries the odor of mothballs. Fresher terms such as 'spouse,' 'significant other' and 'partner' are pointedly gender neutral" (Haddock

2001, D1). While the author of this opinion piece presents the shift to gender-neutral language as a positive development, a 1997 letter to the editor in the *San Francisco Chronicle* criticizes gender neutrality as degendering: "In spite of society's strive [*sic*] to make this a gender-neutral society, men are male and women are female. That is what makes life interesting!" (Darnell 1997, A26).

Other articles indicate concern that gender neutrality as degendering harms women specifically. For instance, a book review titled "Victims of Reform" observes: "90 percent of all custodial parents are women, although some gender-neutral provisions now force women to fight (often by bargaining away support) for what used to be their right" (Williamson 1985, A39). Adopting a different, but also critical, stance on degendering, a book review of Lori Duron's *Raising My Rainbow: Adventures in Raising a Fabulous, Gender Creative Son* opines that the author's charm makes it "easy to forgive" her "early mistakes," including buying her child "disappointing gender-neutral toys," while "making him leave 'girl' toys or tutus in the car during public outings" (Valenti 2014, BR26). Here, the author taps into cultural understandings of degendering as unappealing due to a deficit of gender signification.

While the degendering frame dominates our sample, the gender inclusivity frame becomes increasingly more common in the 2000s and especially since 2011, when discussions of transgender issues and people also become more frequent. Articles discuss the growing usage of gender-neutral pronouns on more liberal college campuses and on college housing questionnaires (Bernstein 2004), as well as a transgender activist's preference for "the sex-neutral honorific of M., and to be referred to as s/he, with the possessive not his or her but hir" (Goldberg 1999). These gender-neutral pronouns and honorifics represent additional options—rather than replacements—for gender-specific pronouns or honorifics. This difference marks a crucial distinction between the *degendering* and *gender inclusivity* frames.

Not every article in our sample presents the establishment of gender-neutral restrooms as a welcome alternative. In a 2013 article, a father of a trans girl objects to his child being told she has to use the gender-neutral—as opposed to the girls'—restroom. The "stocky Marine veteran" states: "This is elementary school, and you're singling out this one kid and saying she has to use a special bathroom?" (Frosch 2013, A10). This father rejects a proposed gender system in which "special" accommodations—rather than access to the sex-segregated restroom of their choice—are offered to transgender people.

The androgyny frame came up least frequently, appearing in just 5 percent of the sample. There is no statistically significant difference in the frequency of the appearance of this frame between articles that mention or do not mention either sexual orientation or gender identity. Over one-third of the articles that

discuss gender neutrality as androgyny mention consumer products, including clothing. For instance, an article discussing "gender-neutral fashion trends" praises a "one-look-fits-all collection of off-the-shoulder tank tops, trench coats, and lacelike denim tops and trousers on a cast of androgynous models" as "a boon for designers" (La Ferla 2015). Appearing infrequently, albeit somewhat more often in 2010–16, compared to earlier decades (see fig. 2), the androgyny frame elicits scant criticism in our news sample.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has examined a key term—*gender neutral*—in the news. We found that news media reports associate the term with the issues of gender equality, lesbian and gay rights, and transgender rights. Articles discussing gender equality between women and men, however, tend not to discuss LGBT rights. Similarly, articles discussing LGBT rights tend not to discuss gender equality between women and men. Moreover, news discussions of gender equality between women and men tend to frame gender neutrality as degendering—or deemphasizing gender distinctions—whereas news reports on transgender issues tend to frame gender neutrality as gender inclusivity: that is, as recognizing multiple gender identities. By identifying and tracking different meanings of *gender neutral* in the news, this article advances "undoing" and "redoing" gender theory.

The fact that the term *gender neutral* is associated with multiple identity categories indicates a shared investment, among groups that are often viewed as having discrete interests and agendas, in challenging a dominant gender system. Our finding, however, that the news typically discusses issues of gender equality between women and men in isolation from LGBT issues suggests that the news media rarely make these connections and may even mask them. Moreover, our finding that *gender neutral* is framed differently when discussing distinct identity categories raises the possibility that the use of this single term obscures fundamental differences among strategies and visions for changing prevailing gender arrangements. In this way, our study speaks to gaps in the existing scholarship on the interlocking nature of the gender binary, heteronormativity, and the cisgender assumption (Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

Because the term *gender neutral* is used to designate alternatives to status quo gender practices, we expected to find evidence of opposition to gender neutrality, and we did. Given the enduring salience of gender in everyday social interaction (Ridgeway 2011), we anticipated finding particular resistance to the idea of gender neutrality as degendering. In our news sample, some commentators bemoaned the threatened end of sexual difference, while others feared that gender-neutral reforms would allow certain advantages to be taken

away from women (e.g., in child custody cases). More unexpected was evidence of affirmation of gender neutrality as degendering, as in the case of coverage of efforts undertaken in several US states to replace all gendered terms (e.g., *policeman*) with degendered ones (e.g., *police officer*) in state legal codes. Examples in our sample of successful gender neutral reforms counter the skepticism evinced in theoretical debates about the plausibility of undoing (as opposed to merely redoing) gender. At the same time, the fact that we found numerous examples both in support of and in opposition to gender neutrality as degendering indicates that disagreement—stretching back at least to the ERA ratification struggle—persists over whether a degendering approach is desirable or necessary to achieve true gender equality.

A lack of consensus on the goal of undoing gender may explain why competing gender neutrality frames—most notably gender inclusivity—have also achieved traction during this period. While gender inclusivity challenges the status quo by recognizing more than two gender categories, this frame leaves unaddressed the persistence of a gender hierarchy that privileges men and masculinity. Further research is necessary to determine whether the success of some gender-neutral restroom campaigns is due to presenting gender neutrality as a principle rooted in respect for personal choice rather than as a strategy to undo the gender system. Future work should also consider whether adding new gender options has as much potential to upend the social institution of gender as does replacing *all* sex-specific categories with gender-neutral ones. One risk posed by gender-neutral advocacy is that emphasis on gender self-determination could result in amplifying—rather than reducing—the social significance of gender. While adding new gender categories may address one feature of the binary gender system—tracking people into rigid sex roles—it does not necessarily confront the subordination of people associated with femininity (Case 2000; Lorber 2005; Serano 2007).

The relative absence of the androgyny frame in our sample suggests that the term *gender neutral* generally has not been used in news reporting to describe individuals or practices that combine traditionally masculine and feminine elements. Further research is necessary to determine whether this indicates a broader societal rejection of the androgyny ideal itself. Parental support for gender nonconformity, particularly in boys, is often inhibited by anxiety that a child will identify as gay, demonstrating how heteronormativity contours gender role expectations (Sedgewick 1991; Martin 2005, Pascoe 2005). Notably, while the children's record, book, and television series *Free to Be . . . You and Me*, which debuted in 1972, was generally well received, the story of a little boy named William who wanted a doll elicited controversy. ABC television executives asked *Free to Be* creator Marlo Thomas to cut "William's Doll," lest it "turn every . . . American boy into a homosexual" (Paris 2012, 89–90).

Thomas's refusal caused a toothpaste company to decline sponsorship of the television version (Steinem 2012). A preschool teacher who used *Free to Be* in parent workshops noted that "it wasn't easy to convince parents that boys also needed to be liberated. A girl wearing a hard hat instead of a frilly hat was okay, but a boy with a doll brought out fears of homosexuality" (Sprung 2012, 75).

If androgyny incites fears of male homosexuality, one might expect to find greater receptivity to gender neutrality as degendering than to gender neutrality as androgyny—at least in cases where degendering is perceived as only deemphasizing gender in specific contexts rather than as an effort to redo normative masculinity. Based on our analyses, the relative prominence of gender neutrality as degendering (which we associate with undoing gender), in comparison to gender neutrality as either androgyny or gender inclusivity (both of which we associate with redoing gender), cautions against assuming that attempts to undo gender are inherently more threatening to the status quo than efforts to "merely" redo gender.

In tracing the usage of *gender neutrality* in the news, this study has elucidated the multiple meanings ascribed to a neglected concept in US gender politics. Since the 1970s, the term *gender neutral* has been associated with a wide array of social practices that defy or resist prevailing gender practices. Our study has produced a rich new body of empirical evidence about the usage and meanings of the term *gender neutral* while advancing theoretical understanding of possibilities for redoing and undoing gender. In shifting from the typical focus in gender scholarship on gender identity to consideration of social practices and institutional arrangements associated with gender, this study demonstrates the critical payoff of research that considers not only how *people* do gender but what it might mean to do gender differently at *institutional* and *structural* levels (Risman 2004).

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