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# Naturalizing Gender through Childhood Socialization Messages in a Zoo

Betsie Garner<sup>1</sup> and David Grazian<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*We draw on public observations conducted in a zoo to identify three instances in which adults make use of its specific spatial and symbolic resources to transmit socialization messages to children according to “naturalized” models of hegemonic gender difference. First, adults attribute gender to zoo animals by projecting onto them human characteristics associated with feminine and masculine stereotypes. Second, adults mobilize zoo exhibits as props for modeling their own normative gender displays in the presence of children. Third, adults discipline boys and girls differently in the context of the zoo’s built environment, and in doing so, they communicate socialization messages to children regarding how to behave in conventionally gendered ways. In emphasizing the context of the zoo as a site for the naturalization of gender categories, we identify how adults transmit gender socialization messages to children that promote gender stereotypes associated with the biological determinism of the natural living world.*

## Keywords

culture, socialization, childhood/adolescence, family, gender, animals, identity processes, ethnography

Social psychology reminds us that parents and other adults transmit socialization messages to children about the ideological meanings associated with social distinction and boundary-making in everyday life. Parents and elementary school teachers transmit socialization messages to middle-class children that elevate their sense of entitlement and privilege in institutional settings (Calarco 2011, 2014; Lareau 2003). African American parents mobilize racial socialization messages to educate their children about the experience of racism, discrimination, and what it means to be black (Brown and Lesane-Brown 2006; Frabutt,

Walker, and MacKinnon-Lewis 2002; Hughes et al. 2009). Mosque leaders socialize Muslim American youth to practice specific forms of stigma management (O’Brien 2011). It is by reading and interpreting such socialization messages in situations supervised by adults that young children are able to “take the role of the other” and eventually acquire a concept

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of selfhood, a self-identity embedded in social relations (Mead 1934).

In many instances, socialization messages communicate to children that hegemonic social categories ought to be understood as *natural* rather than cultural artifacts of social life. Among all other cultural categories, gender is perhaps most prone to being misunderstood as natural, due to its close association with anatomical sex differences (Connell 1985). The naturalization of social categories and cultural ideology is therefore rarely more acute than in instances of gender socialization messaging, notably with regard to how parents expose their children to hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity.

Yet as Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985:595) observe, "The facts of anatomical and physiological variation should caution us against assuming that biology presents society with clear-cut categories of people. . . . It is precisely the property of human sociality that it transcends biological determination." Although accomplishments of human behavior, models of masculinity and femininity appear natural because gendered individuals adhere to an institutionalized set of myths they learn through everyday forms of socialization in their formative years of development from birth through preschool and elementary school. Children learn how to "do gender" by participating in "activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'" (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). This process renders the socially constructed quality of gender ideologies invisible and instead portrays them as literally the natural order of things: "Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987:137).

Indeed, studies of childhood socialization reveal how gender ideologies are learned, negotiated, and naturalized in everyday life rather than biologically determined. From infancy, parents dress boys and girls in gender-specific colors and expect them to behave differently, and throughout childhood, parents continue to encourage their participation in gendered activities (Witt 1997). Parents communicate explicit messages about gender to their children by discussing what they believe are appropriate attitudes and behaviors for boys and girls (Epstein and Ward 2011). Outside of the home, Martin (1998:495–96) argues that the gendering of children's bodies is part of the "hidden curriculum" of preschool "that controls children's bodily practices [and] serves also to turn kids who are similar in bodily comportment, movement, and practice into girls and boys, children whose bodily practices are different." In her book *Gender Play*, Barrie Thorne (1993) observes how schoolteachers often use gender labels when interacting with children, particularly when dividing classrooms into opposing teams of boys and girls for in-class competitions. These socialization practices encourage kids to accept normative gender ideologies as natural rather than as sociocultural myths about "what little boys and girls are made of," as goes the early nineteenth-century nursery rhyme.

In this article, we argue that these socialization messages are particularly pronounced in the nature-inspired context of zoos and other public places where adults and children interact with nonhuman animals and wildlife. We specifically draw on public observations conducted in a zoo to identify three instances in which families and other groups of visitors with accompanying children make use of the zoo's specific spatial and symbolic resources to transmit socialization messages to girls and boys according to

“naturalized” models of hegemonic gender difference. First, adults attribute gender to zoo animals by projecting onto them human characteristics associated with feminine and masculine stereotypes. Second, adults mobilize zoo exhibits as props for modeling their own normative gender displays in the presence of children. Third, adults discipline boys and girls differently in the context of the zoo’s built environment, and in doing so, they communicate socialization messages to children regarding how to behave in conventionally gendered ways. In emphasizing the context of the zoo as a site for the naturalization of gender categories and public behavior, we identify how adults transmit gender socialization messages to children that promote gender stereotypes associated with the biological determinism of the natural living world.

#### NATURALIZING GENDER DIFFERENCES AT THE ZOO

As family-friendly attractions that blend superficial features of the natural environment with the stuff of popular children’s entertainment, contemporary zoos and their animal exhibits provide symbolic resources for naturalizing the cultural ideologies communicated through adult-child interactions, including those that reify dominant gender stereotypes. Research in animal studies chronicles how elements of nature—and, in particular, nonhuman animals and wildlife—have been mobilized throughout history as cultural models of social reality. Aesop’s ancient Greek myths and fables anthropomorphized animals by imbuing them with human characteristics and foibles from narcissism to sour grapes. In ancient Egypt and Rome, kings and emperors displayed exotic wildlife as symbols of imperial conquest, just as dictators and autocrats today collect tigers and

other predators as a means of expressing power and machismo (Anthony and Spence 2007; Croke 1997; Hancocks 2001; Kaufman 2010). Since Durkheim’s ([1912] 1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, sociologists have uncovered how societies and subcultures invest animals (and humans) with meaning and metaphor, whether the Nazis regarding Jews as filthy “lower” beasts likened to parasites and vermin (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Herzog 2010; Raffles 2010), the Balinese use of cocks as totems of masculinity (Geertz 1973), or Turkish pigeon handlers in Berlin attaching ethnic identity to their birds (Jerolmack 2013).

As tools of childhood socialization, contemporary picture books, television cartoons, films, and songs aimed at children are similarly full of examples of wild animals endowed with humanlike personalities and identities: Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse, Road Runner (Daston and Mitman 2005). The use of anthropomorphized animals in child-centered popular culture makes racial and ethnic stereotypes seem natural (think of Speedy Gonzales from Looney Tunes or King Louie from *The Jungle Book*), while Disney/Pixar films like *Lady and the Tramp*, *The Lion King*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Zootopia* naturalize gender stereotypes (Giroux and Pollock 2010). Even more realistic depictions of nature such as wildlife documentaries reproduce human gender hierarchies by anthropomorphizing animals as “self-sacrificing mothers” and “physically and sexually aggressive mature males” (Pierson 2005).

Like other child-centered entertainment landscapes, zoos also display nonhuman animals in a nature-inspired context created for family consumption. Through high-concept landscape design, zoos exhibit manufactured yet credible simulations of ecological worlds, especially for audiences more accustomed to seeing

exotic animals on television and in movies than in their actual habitats. Even though zoo environments are carefully planned and closely monitored, they simultaneously invite visitors to imagine that they are exploring remote and wild locales, from the untamed wilderness of the African plains to the swampy wetlands of the Everglades (Grazian 2012). Relative to the familiarity and perceived safety and sterility of private homes, schools, offices, and retail shops, zoos can at least *seem* natural and wild in comparison to contemporary postindustrial landscapes, just like modern parks, botanical gardens, and other “green” spaces of entertainment and public leisure blur boundaries between nature and urban life (Capek 2010).

As simulations of the global biosphere writ small, zoos thus provide a convenient site for observing adults as they draw on the symbolic power of nonhuman animals and their staged environments to quite literally naturalize conventional gender stereotypes when interacting with children. Just as dog owners imbue their pets with gendered personalities and incorporate them into their own manufactured displays of gender identity (Ramirez 2006), zoo visitors relate to animals in ways that both reflect and reproduce hegemonic masculinity and femininity. By anthropomorphizing zoo animals in nature-inspired settings, adults attribute gender stereotypes to the biological determinism associated with the natural living world and communicate such myths to children through gender socialization messages.

At the zoo, gender ideologies are also transmitted to children in another way. Zoos are not only representations of nature but also spatial environments of human behavior, having made great strides in the past several decades by providing young visitors with interactive playgrounds and other outdoor spaces conducive to early childhood development

and sociability through play (Grazian 2015). Given the importance of interpretive play among kids in peer group settings (Corsaro 1992), it is no surprise that children transform the built environment of the zoo into a playground for physical activity and their imaginative cultural routines. Yet in an era in which middle-class parents give their kids limited freedom of mobility in public places (Rutherford 2011), zoos provide a spatial landscape in which parents and guardians discipline children’s behavior, often holding girls and boys to different standards. These gender socialization messages communicate not only an expectation that girls and boys naturally behave in differently gendered ways, but also that boys ought to have greater autonomy to explore and conquer the outdoor natural and physical world than girls.

These fleeting and seemingly mundane interactions between adults and children at the zoo represent the sort of subtle and indirect socialization messages that encourage children to adopt dominant gender ideologies and behavioral norms. Grownups undoubtedly transmit such messages with varying levels of self-awareness or intent, but the socialization messaging processes we describe here do not depend on adults purposefully shaping children into gendered beings. Instead, in keeping with recent developments in cognitive social psychology, we refer to the “automatic and unconscious influences in everyday life” that, like gender stereotypes more generally, provide convenient interpretive frameworks for making sense of routine social interaction (Schwarz 1998:257).

This article illustrates how adults draw on the symbolic and spatial environments of zoos to socialize children according to normative gender ideologies and models of gendered public behavior. We see our work as an extension of a long-standing tradition in social psychology

that draws on in situ observation to examine how people perform interactional and identity work in public. This area of research and theory development in social psychology builds on Chicago school approaches to social behaviorism (Cooley 1998; Mead 1934) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959, 1963a, 1963b; Hughes 1958) through detailed ethnographic observations and analyses of public interaction and everyday social life. Studies in this tradition have long emphasized the symbiotic relationship between social behavior and the character of public places from downtown plazas to blues and jazz clubs and cocktail lounges to the city itself (Becker 1963; Grazian 2003, 2008; Whyte 2009; Wirth 1938). According to the Chicago urban sociologist Robert E. Park (1915:578), "The city is rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit it. The consequence is that the city possesses a moral as well as a physical organization, and these two mutually interact in characteristic ways to mold and modify one another." Contemporary examples of urban ethnography informed by this social psychological tradition include studies of homeless men (Duneier and Molotch 1999; Snow and Anderson 1987), black youth in urban neighborhoods (Anderson 1990, 1999), families visiting fun houses (Katz 1999), rappers on inner-city street corners (Lee 2009), amateur knitters who gather in coffee shops (Fields 2014), vendors and artists on the Venice beachfront boardwalk in Los Angeles (Orrico 2015), and chess players in New York's Washington Square Park (Fine 2015).

Closer to our purposes, recent ethnographic research in social psychology has also included more targeted investigations of how and when adults transmit gender socialization messages to children in public, whether at Little League baseball games (Fine 1987; Grasmuck 2005), toy stores (Sherry 2009; Williams 2006),

or museums (Garner 2015). With regard to the role that zoos play in childhood socialization processes, we are particularly beholden to Marjorie DeVault's (2000) observational study of family outings to the zoo in which parents direct children toward focused collective activities (e.g., reading interpretive signs at animal exhibits). These activities give kids a sense of shared participation in a larger social world and a feeling of exclusive membership in a bounded family unit demarcated from others in public space. By drawing on public observations to specifically emphasize the socialization of gender ideologies among zoo-visiting families and other sets of grownups accompanied by children, we see our work as building on and extending the theoretical reach of this line of research.

#### STUDYING GENDER SOCIALIZATION AT THE ZOO

Zoos provide an ideal field site for observing how parents from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnoracial backgrounds socialize children in public places. This article draws on approximately 100 hours of public observations of visitors conducted at "City Zoo," a major Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited zoo located in the northeastern United States by a research team of three field observers, two undergraduate students, and one graduate student, each individually trained by the second author. (As the graduate student member of the research team, the first author personally conducted 28.5 hours of observations.) Field observers also developed research skills and a familiarity with standard sociological concepts (including gender) in either a graduate course or an advanced undergraduate course in ethnographic field methods in the social sciences, also taught by the second author. All three members of the research team were women and conducted their fieldwork individually.

During their observations, fieldworkers stationed themselves at particular exhibits and observed families and other socially bounded groups come and go instead of shadowing particular groups of visitors from one exhibit to another. In search of children accompanied by adults, fieldworkers tended to spend more time conducting observations at popular animal displays that draw large crowds, such as those exhibiting gorillas, orangutans, and polar bears. Every animal exhibit at City Zoo was visited and observed at least once. Though these exhibits provided the primary site for the team's research, observations were also conducted along walking paths and in rest areas, food pavilions, and gift shops. Zoo observation sessions varied by day of the week and time of day and usually lasted two to four hours, after which researchers wrote up extensive fieldnotes documenting their observations (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

During their observation sessions, researchers were advised to give special scrutiny to how guests responded to the zoo's physical and symbolic environment and what they said to one another during such encounters. Given the typical audiences who regularly visit City Zoo (and most other U.S. zoos, for that matter), observers found themselves directing much of their attention toward adults accompanied by children. (For more on City Zoo, see Grazian 2015.) They were not specifically prompted to look out for instances of childhood socialization and the reproduction of gender ideology through socialization messages at the zoo, although these themes quickly became apparent over the course of their fieldwork. We instead used an inductive grounded theory approach to generate and develop these and other themes that emerged most consistently from our recorded observations (Emerson et al. 1995; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Upon

the completion of our data collection, fieldnotes were formally coded and analyzed with the help of MAXQDA, a qualitative data software package. While the research team uncovered dozens of social patterns among families and other visitors at the zoo (as discussed in Grazian 2015), in this article we focus exclusively on the use of gender socialization messages between adults and children.

Finally, the usual caveats to observational research must be applied. Given the inability of the research team to consult with the thousands of observed subjects under their gaze, children's ages have been given as unverifiable approximates. Observers did their best to identify the genders of both adults and children in good faith (as well as their sexual orientation, marital status, and parent/child relationship) and to distinguish between parents and other accompanying adults, although it is certainly possible that errors in reporting were made, a common occupational hazard in such circumstances. Given that similar behaviors were observed across families regardless of their identifiable race or class status, we chose not to include such descriptors here.

### GENDERING ANIMALS

Child-centered media and popular culture emphasize gender difference by depicting nonhuman animals as gendered beings. Children's books, films, and television programming make regular use of animal characters with anthropomorphized gender identities (Giroux and Pollock 2010; McCabe et al. 2011). Beloved characters like Papa Q. Bear and Sister Bear from *The Berenstain Bears* and PBS's *Arthur the Aardvark* are portrayed fulfilling traditionally gendered family roles like father, daughter, and son, just as Jim Henson's *Muppets* are assigned male and female names along with stereotypically gendered personalities, including

Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy. Similarly, families at zoos often project cultural distinctions onto nature by assigning human gender identities to the animals they observe and narrating anthropomorphic accounts of their behavior through the cultural lens of girlhood and boyhood. By interpreting zoo animals according to the cultural logic of gender difference, families naturalize such dichotomies by associating fabricated gender distinctions with those thought to exist in the natural living world.

In fact, as we observed the transmission of socialization messages from parents to children, we found adults overwhelmingly preoccupied with the biological sex of specific animals as they encountered them on family jaunts through the zoo, often associating them with human gender stereotypes. One mother at an ape pavilion pointed to a gorilla and said to her daughter, "See how his hands look just like our hands? Well, they are bigger. *They are like Daddy's hands, I guess.*" When making associations between the animal kingdom and gendered human attributes, families naturalize gender differences among men and women, boys and girls.

Occasionally, parents emphasize how sex differences within certain species may seem counterintuitive according to hegemonic gender ideologies associated with humans, thereby relying on the species' exceptionalism to illustrate the persistence of otherwise dominant stereotypes. In one such example, a mother pointed out a wandering peahen and peacock. "That's the female and that's the male," she said. Her daughter was not so sure, and asked, "That's the boy? And that's the girl? I don't think so." The woman explained, "No, I'm sure. The males are the pretty, bright ones, and the females are the plain ones. *You would think the pretty one would be the female, but it isn't.*" The mother depicts the plumage of peacocks and peahens as a reversal

of taken-for-granted gender norms and thus literally draws on the exception to prove the rule.

For some creatures, it may not be easy for laypersons to identify the sex of an individual animal or else determine whether or how groups of animals might be biologically related to one another. Of course, this rarely prevents families from assigning unauthenticated sex identities to zoo animals and subsequently interpreting them according to the logic of Western heterosexual kinship structures. For example, one father pointed to a group of river otters and said to his two toddler boys, "Look, it's the momma and the papa and their babies!" without verifying whether the animals were actually related in that way. One of the toddlers pointed to a lone otter off to the side and yelled, "Who's that?" "The uncle," replied his father. On another occasion, an eight-year-old boy pointed to each of two gorillas, saying, "Dad, look! That's *you*, and *Mom* is over there!" He indicated that the larger gorilla was the father and that the smaller one was the mother, apparently without realizing that both gorillas were males that belonged to a bachelor troop segregated from contact with females.

Given that many families take the idealized nuclear household for granted as the most universal of family formations, such kinship structures provide parents with a convenient (if dubious) shortcut for interpreting specific animal groupings and wildlife species. In doing so, they reify gendered patterns of social relations as naturally occurring phenomena rather than artifacts of culture. Adults regularly discuss displayed groups of zoo animals as if they were organized into patriarchal divisions of gendered labor. In one instance, a young girl peered over a barrier to catch a glimpse of what appeared to be a mother kangaroo and her baby. She then turned to ask her own mother,



"Where's the daddy?" She replied, "He's at work!" In the zoo's primate house, a mother held her young daughter up to see the orangutans and compared the mother ape to herself: "That's like you and me. The mommy is taking care of the baby." Another mother at the same exhibit said to her young daughter, "She's about your size. She's a little girl playing with her momma, just like you."

On another occasion, a father and daughter watched the same family of orangutans romp about in their outdoor enclosure. The father described the scene to his children: "See the big orangutan on the ground, and the baby climbing the rope over there? He's a good climber." He continued by telling his daughter an imaginary story about the animals. "And now the mommy orangutan is going down there to yell at him. *Go do the dishes!*" she's probably saying." His daughter then picked up the narrative thread: "He's not doing them." "No," the father replied, "he's going to eat more lettuce." In all these instances, models of patriarchal relations associated with traditional heteronormative families—that is, fathers as breadwinners and mothers as caretakers, housekeepers, and scolds (Hochschild 2003)—are used as cultural resources for both interpreting zoo animal behavior as normatively gendered and portraying gender inequalities within *human* families as the natural order of things.

#### ANIMALS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

Along with identifying animals according to the cultural logic of normative gender difference and household formation, adults visiting the zoo also appropriate captive animals as props for their own displays of traditional stereotypes and dispositions associated with gender. These gender displays reference conventions of binary distinction that have historically

characterized women and girls as romantic, delicate, emotional, nurturing, and overly sensitive to beauty and aesthetics—as the aforementioned nursery rhyme goes, "sugar and spice and all things nice"—while men and boys remain identified with stoicism, physical strength, and rationality along with a sense of daring and fearlessness, a so-called animal instinct symbolized by "snips and snails and puppy dogs' tails." When grownups "do gender" by enacting these stereotypes in the presence of children, they transmit gender socialization messages to boys and girls that naturalize hegemonic understandings of masculinity and femininity.

For example, while observing zoo exhibits, some women call attention to those animals they deem most physically stunning or else simply cute. While visiting an enclosure of tropical birds, one mother told her son, "This is so pretty. The colors of the feathers of the birds are magnificent. There are so many different varieties, different sizes." Another mother fawned over a baby orangutan with her son and daughter. Photographing the ape, she said, "Aw, look. She knows she's getting her picture taken, and she likes it. She's smiling at us! She knows she's a pretty girl."

In these instances, women transmit socialization messages to children by modeling a normatively feminine disposition toward aesthetics and beauty. In fact, some explicitly emphasize the physical attractiveness of animals while ignoring other relevant attributes. One mother picked up her three-year-old daughter to show her a flamingo enclosure, asking her, "Aren't they pretty?" The girl asked what the flamingos were doing, and her mother replied, "They're hanging out." The girl asked why, and the mother said, "That's what they do . . . I don't know. *Aren't they pretty?*"

Meanwhile, although fathers occasionally remark on the attractiveness of zoo

animals as well, these instances represent exceptions to the regularity with which mothers do the same. For example, we documented 35 instances in which women made explicit remarks about the aesthetic qualities of zoo animals as cute, beautiful, ugly, or otherwise noteworthy in their physical appearance. In contrast, we counted eight instances of men making similar observations. Yet even in these alternative cases, men still tended to naturalize gender distinction through socialization messaging. For example, in one case, a father carried his four-year-old daughter through a small mammal exhibition space and pointed out a squirrel. "You like that squirrel? The little squirrel?" "Cute!" she exclaimed in a high-pitched voice. "Yeah, very cute and tiny," encouraged the father. In such instances, parents validate their children's gendered behavior as normal.

Fathers also incorporate exhibited animals into their own public displays of hegemonic masculinity. By emphasizing the strength, dexterity, and dangerousness of zoo animals over their beauty, men do gender by highlighting those traits most traditionally associated with high-status masculinity: physical power, toughness, dominance, courage, and aggressiveness (Bird 1996; Connell 1995; Donaldson 1993; Mishkind et al. 1986; Smith 2008). Our research team observed a family—a mother, father, and two boys, aged eight and ten—watching a napping red panda. The mother squealed, "Oh—so cute! That is just so, so cute." The father replied, sarcastically, "Yeah, look at those sharp claws—*so cute*," emphasizing the carnivore's lethality. The boys laughed at their father's mocking remarks while their mother reiterated, "He *is* cute. So, so, cute." In a similar instance, one family searched for an African lion in its enclosure when their five-year-old daughter exclaimed, "Big kitty cat!" The father

disagreed. "No, not like a kitty cat. This is a big lion. *Big and mean*." The girl repeated herself—"Big kitty cat!"—while her mother explained, "Yes, it's sort of like a big kitty cat. It probably doesn't purr, though." "No," the father insisted, "it *definitely* doesn't purr. *That guy could eat you*." Elsewhere at the zoo, a father and his four-year-old son sat on a bench viewing an alligator exhibit. The father asked the boy, "Do you see the alligator's sharp teeth? Do you see as they open and close their mouths? See how they snap their mouths closed?" The man opened and closed his mouth, making a loud snapping sound that caused the boy to laugh. The boy then mimicked his father by opening and closing his own mouth, repeating, "Snap, snap" while his father reiterated that the alligator had "very sharp teeth." In all these instances, men transmit socialization messages to boys that naturalize hegemonic norms of masculinity, including physical strength and aggressive behavior.

Sometimes men emphasize socially constructed attributes associated with manhood—such as competitiveness, toughness, and aggression—when making explicit reference to animals fighting at the zoo. As two families stood observing a set of gibbons, one father said, "Oh my god, can you believe that? How much power they have in those little arms? They look like cute, furry animals, but they're *strong*." The other father replied, laughing, "Yeah, I would not want to get into a fight with him." Occasionally zoo animals *do* actually fight with one another, and fathers often react with gleeful anticipation. On one such occasion, a large silverback gorilla became aggressive with a smaller male gorilla in City Zoo's primate house while several fathers hooted and hollered, "Oh! Oh, oh! Uh-oh!," calling attention to the altercation while crowding around the observation window, as if at a rowdy hockey game.

Even during instances when zoo animals display few signs of aggression or only minimal hints of physical power or agility, fathers sometimes publicly narrate an imaginary drama among these beasts *as if* they were engaged in violence. One father pointed to a docile-looking polar bear and said to his three-year-old son, "RAWRRR! He's gonna eat you up! He's coming for us!" which made the boy laugh. On other occasions, fathers complain when animals *fail* to exhibit physical prowess. One such male duo watched intently as a polar bear hesitated to jump into its pool of water, opting instead for pacing back and forth through the grass. The father then egged on the great white bear, "Take a running jump!" When the bear finally plopped back down on the grass in his enclosure, the man said to the boy, "*He's a little sissy, isn't he?*," demeaning the bear as too weak and feminine to uphold masculine ideals of agility and drive.

Of course, fathers certainly demonstrated sensitivity in instances when their sons appeared frightened by the risk of violence among animals at the zoo. In one such case, a father picked up and consoled his five-year-old boy when he began crying after witnessing a rowdy physical confrontation between two gorillas. Nevertheless, we observed 17 instances of men applauding a zoo animal's strength, agility, or aggressiveness but only 3 cases of women doing the same. In fact, mothers were just as likely to communicate socialization messages that emphasized feminine stereotypes associated with fragility or even fear. At a wildcat exhibit, mothers watching video footage of a lion attacking its prey appeared disturbed as they shielded their children, while one exclaimed, "Well, that's upsetting!" In another instance, a mother-daughter pair spotted a feral (noncaptive) bird fly into an open-air tiger exhibit and crash into the glass viewing window.

After falling to the ground, the wildcat began hungrily pawing at the bird. Visibly aghast, the mother responded to her daughter's fascination with the proceedings—"Is he going to eat it?"—with revulsion: "No, it's fine. *Let's go.*" Since the girl eagerly continued watching the tiger as it proceeded to voraciously chomp down on the bird, dropping feathers on the ground below, the mother insisted again, "*Let's go,*" before adding, "*I can't wait to hear about this from your therapist.*" As a socialization message, the mother's normatively gendered reaction implies that her daughter has been traumatized (and thus *improperly* socialized) by the event and will therefore require psychological correcting—even as the daughter's obvious interest in the tiger attack *contradicts* such feminine stereotypes.

After repeated interactions with their parents at the zoo, boys and girls may come to see gender differences as natural rather than socially constructed. In a particularly telling instance, a girl's father lifted her up to a snake as her mother protested, "He is ugly; these are gross. I don't want to see any more snakes." "Yeah, me neither," added the girl, whose father insisted, "They're so cool, though." "*Maybe to boys,*" the girl retorted. In their reactions to animals at the zoo, parents perform hegemonic masculinity and femininity, and these gender displays serve as socialization messages that facilitate the naturalization of socially constructed gender differences for both boys and girls.

### DISCIPLINING BOYS AND GIRLS

As a third instance of how families make use of the spatial and symbolic resources of the zoo to transmit gender socialization messages to their children, parents discipline their sons and daughters differently within the terrain of the zoo's built environment. Young visitors regularly appropriate the material features of City Zoo's

landscape in moments of interactivity, transforming statues, handrails, and staircases into makeshift play apparatuses, just as their teenage counterparts do when engaging in risky street play such as skateboarding, fixed-gear biking, and parkour (Kidder 2011, 2012). In disciplining boys and girls differently in the zoo environment, parents communicate socialization messages to children that emphasize the naturalization of normatively gendered differences concerning public behavior considered more or less appropriate for girls and boys.

### **Disciplining Daughters**

Contemporary middle-class parents tend to constrain the physical activity and adventurousness of their daughters much more than their sons, sometimes by emphasizing their risk of bodily harm. Upon approaching a lion enclosure and spotting her daughter jumping up onto its railing for a closer view, a mother warned her daughter, “No, Molly—you’d make a tasty snack for one of those guys—get down,” and she immediately obeyed. Even when hungry zoo animals seem to pose little threat, parents worry that their daughters will hurt themselves. When a five-year-old girl attempted to climb up a retaining wall and stand on a ledge to better view a pair of polar bears, her mother exclaimed, “Get down! Just stand there before you scrape your legs all up and start bleeding!” Similarly, an eight-year-old girl at the zoo’s tortoise exhibit used her arms to balance her weight while hanging from the enclosure’s fence. Her mother grabbed her from behind, sat her back on the ground, and scolded her. “What are you doing? You’re going to knock your teeth out! Don’t do that!”

Of course, sometimes girls do accidentally hurt themselves, and when they do, parents interpret this as documented

“proof” that it really *is* dangerous for them to exert themselves by engaging in physical expressiveness. At a tiger enclosure, a four-year-old girl excitedly skipped and jumped along the edge of the viewing glass. Suddenly she fell down and immediately began to cry. Her father quickly picked her up, assuring her, “It’s okay!” But her mother disagreed. “Didn’t I say stop? I knew you were going to fall eventually.” During such parent-child interactions, the former associate girlhood with fragility, reinforcing traditional norms of femininity by implying that girls are categorically delicate and easily bruised.

Even when safety is not their most immediate concern, parents still occasionally rein in their daughters’ physical expressiveness at the zoo, sometimes demanding they maintain a “ladylike” composure in public. At a kangaroo exhibit, a large group of mothers and their children stood around complaining of the animals’ inactivity: One girl even called to the kangaroos, “At least *hop* for us—gosh!” Subsequently, another girl in the group, about six years old, began hopping up and down herself, but one of the mothers admonished her: “Stop jumping around like a crazy child!” When a preschool-aged girl walked along a sidewalk curb as if it were a balance beam, her mother reached out to take her hand and encouraged her to step down to walk along the path instead. (The girl refused, pleading, “I’m practicing balancing!”) Another mother walked with her two preteen daughters by a decorative water fixture with a bubbling fountain and instructed them not to touch it. Even if inadvertent, these admonishments nevertheless function as socialization messages adults transmit to children about the social expectations foisted on girls in public.

Adults also warn girls about the appropriateness of exploring the zoo grounds on

their own. Near the entrance to City Zoo stands a statue of a full-grown elephant with its baby at its side, both protected by a surrounding garden and decorative fence. When one mother stopped by the elephants with her four-year-old daughter, she asked, "Do you see the baby elephant? See how the mother [and not the father] is protecting her baby?" The daughter excitedly swung her leg over the fence, but her mother reached over to pull her away: "Don't climb in, you shouldn't climb in—the mother elephant won't like that!" Similarly, when another four-year-old girl began to climb onto a statue of a bear, her father warned, "The statue is not for climbing." The girl protested, "But Papa, that *boy* was climbing." (In fact our observations showed that children regularly climb the statuary at City Zoo.) The father insisted, "That doesn't make it right. No climbing. Come, let's go." He took her by the hand and guided her away from the statue and continued down the walking path. In such cases, adults take norms of hegemonic femininity for granted and communicate gender socialization messages to girls that they should behave accordingly.

### **(Not) Disciplining Sons**

In contrast, we found that adults allowed boys to be much more physically expressive than girls. By allowing their sons to run, jump, climb, and get dirty at the zoo, parents reinforce myths of masculinity associated with physicality and adventurousness. At City Zoo's zebra enclosure, for example, an eight-year-old boy climbed the exhibit railing and hung from it with his hands while his mother stood by without comment. In the primate house, boys routinely race up and down the steps and play along the railing that leads down to the gorilla exhibit without parental interference. On one occasion, two boys, about six and nine, spent

several minutes climbing and hanging on the railing while their parents stood nearby, saying nothing. On another day, two younger boys hung on the railing by their hands, swinging their entire bodies back and forth through the air as if imitating the brachiating apes, stopping only to play elsewhere. A similar set of stairs can be found at the zoo's polar bear exhibit, and during one visit, a group of several boys ran laps up and down the stairs while their mothers stood off to the side to converse among themselves, thus naturalizing the adventure-seeking autonomy and freedom of mobility often accorded to boys in public.

When mobilizing ideologies of gender difference, grownups seem unafraid that boys will get hurt while playing, and even when they do take a spill, their parents usually react with calm, communicating to boys that they are naturally tough enough to handle the scrapes and bruises of outdoor play. In a case of contrasts, we observed a mother holding her eight-year-old daughter's hand at the zoo while her ten-year-old son ran up and down a set of stairs. During his ascent, the boy tripped and fell, and although he did not appear to be badly hurt, he nevertheless looked to his mother with a concerned face. But after she reassured him, "You're alright," he quickly returned to running the stairs while his mother continued to hold her daughter's hand as they looked at the animals.

Parents are often reluctant to constrain their sons' physical activity, and sometimes they even encourage it. As an eight-year-old boy walked by a tree and reached for its low-hanging branch, his father said, "Oh, hang from the branch, and I'll get your picture!" He walked over with an expensive looking camera and started snapping shots as the boy hung from the branch by his arms, as his mother stood off to the side, watching. The father added, "Hold your legs up!

Come on! Action shot!" A few snaps later he remarked, "Awesome. Great shots. You're pretty strong." On another occasion, a father playfully pestered his 14-year-old son, drawing him into a physical game of back-and-forth. The father took his son's hand and twisted the boy's arm. The boy laughed, escaped his father's grip, and then grabbed the man's ear. When a boy watching a kangaroo exhibit exclaimed, "They can jump over this!" his mother answered, "No, they can't." "Well," her son replied, "I can jump over it!" He grinned a naughty grin as if he were considering jumping into the animal enclosure. The mother laughed and said jokingly, "I dare you."

While we observed a total of 26 instances in which girls were disciplined for being too physically active or exhibiting bodily comportment deemed inappropriate by their accompanying adults, we only counted ten instances in which boys were similarly disciplined. (In one such instance, two boys, about eight and ten, had been chasing after one another up and down a set of stairs when their mother shouted, "Stop what you are doing! You are being too loud!" The younger boy complained, "You said we could," as if she had given them permission to play on the stairs. She replied, "I told you that you could go down the stairs *to look at the monkeys*, not run around screaming like idiots. Now, come on—we need to go see the penguins before we leave.") Meanwhile, we observed 14 instances in which the parents of boys behaving in an especially energetic and active manner did not react *at all*, thereby implicitly approving of their behavior. In contrast, we observed only three cases where parents disregarded similar behavior in girls. By encouraging their sons' physical expressiveness (while discouraging that of their daughters), parents transmit socialization messages to children that naturalize aggressive behavior

and outdoor adventurousness as a taken-for-granted attribute of boyhood.

## DISCUSSION

As family-friendly public spaces that simulate the wild, zoos provide a convenient site for observing adults as they draw on the symbolic power of nonhuman animals and their staged environments to quite literally naturalize hegemonic gender ideologies when interacting with children. We identified three instances in which families and other groups of adults with accompanying children make use of the zoo's specific spatial and symbolic resources to transmit socialization messages to children according to naturalized models of hegemonic gender difference. First, adults attribute gender to zoo animals by projecting onto them human characteristics associated with feminine and masculine stereotypes. Second, adults mobilize zoo exhibits as props for modeling their own normative gender displays in the presence of children. Third, adults discipline girls and boys differently in the context of the zoo's built environment, and in doing so, they communicate socialization messages to children regarding how to behave in conventionally gendered ways.

In emphasizing the context of the zoo and its exhibited orangutans, lions, and alligators as a specific site for the naturalization of hegemonic gender differences, we identify how grownups transmit gender socialization messages to children that promote gender stereotypes associated with the biological determinism of the natural living world. A skeptical critic of our analysis might argue that our observations of gender socialization simply reflect empirical differences between boys and girls rather than their social construction. Yet our ethnographic observations in their totality do not bear this out. As we have illustrated throughout

this article, we observed numerous (albeit far less frequent) cases in which both parents and their children contradicted such expectations, thus confirming that the differences we *did* observe in parent-child interactions reflected normative regimes of gender socialization and accomplishment rather than the natural order of things.

One important implication of this study is that traditional constructions of gender along with popular perceptions of nature *together* contribute to the ongoing appeal of natural explanations for social phenomena. Sociologists have long understood gender to be a cultural artifact, but so too have they lamented the persistence with which biological determinism is credited with explaining gender differences (Dewar 1987; Jackson and Rees 2007). Meanwhile, in countless iterations of the nature-nurture debate, some social psychologists observe that gender is culturally constituted but neglect how nature itself is a social reality that humans invest with collective meaning and sentiment. By attending to the social construction of nature and the shared significance people attach to animals, wildlife, and the natural living world (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Bell 1994; Cronon 1996; Fine 1998; Herzog 2010; Jerolmack 2013)—even in places that merely simulate the wild—we can better understand how humans mobilize cultural renderings of nature to validate otherwise imaginary social facts such as gender and also race, ethnicity, and sexuality in everyday life. Given the range of public places that blur boundaries between nature and urban life, including renovated high-lines and other big-city parklands (Halle and Tiso 2014; Loughran 2014; Madden 2010), dog runs (Tissot 2011), marine mammal amusements (Davis 1997), and of course, century-old zoological parks and gardens (Croke 1997; Grazian 2012; 2015; Hancocks 2001; Kisling 1996),

opportunities for further research on the naturalization of social categories in such suggestive spaces abound.

Due to the methods employed in this study, our data consist of fleeting bits of interaction, small vignettes that punctuate much longer zoo visits. The advantage of this method lies in the large number of zoo visitors observed, but this was achieved at the expense of studying individual families or visitors with children for more extensive periods of time. Future research might pursue alternative methods to answer a broader range of questions than those presently addressed. How do gender socialization messages communicated by adults at the zoo differ from those transmitted in schools or other public settings? Do parents intentionally socialize their children to adopt gendered behaviors or dispositions at the zoo, or are these gender socialization messages simply an accidental consequence of the routine interaction rituals of everyday life? While we have provided illustrations of how adults communicate gender socialization messages to children, we admittedly have little evidence that such messages will eventually result in the successful reproduction of gendered selves that endure throughout the life course. Answers to these questions and others would make valuable contributions to our understanding of gender socialization processes more generally.

Finally, this article contributes to a longstanding tradition in social psychology that draws on in situ observation to examine how people perform interactional and identity work in the urban context of public life, whether in jazz clubs, billiard halls, coffee shops, boardwalks, or other places of leisure in populated cities and their surrounding metropolitan regions. This work reminds us how social behavior and the character of public places mutually constitute each other over time. For example, contemporary zoos

aspire to serve the public as not merely pleasure gardens but serious educational institutions in their own right (Grazian 2015), which may encourage parents to increasingly turn zoo outings into didactic opportunities to instruct their children—and not just about animals and wildlife conservation but the very habits, routines, and performances of everyday life. By the same token, it is likely that adults afford more physical autonomy to both girls and boys at zoos than they do in more culturally formal, class-conscious public settings such as art museums, libraries, symphonies, or opera houses (DiMaggio 1982). As child-centered leisure pursuits continue to be seen as enriching activities for the purposeful cultivation of middle- and upper-class youth (Friedman 2013; Lareau 2003; Shaw and Dawson 2001), the observational study of urban public life may become even more central to understanding how parents and other adults socialize children outside more conventionally pedagogical settings such as school and the home. We look forward to seeing further advances in research directed toward this fertile topic in social psychology.

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