

THE GENDER REVEAL PARTY: A NEW MEANS OF PERFORMING PARENTHOOD AND REIFYING GENDER UNDER CAPITALISM

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Abstract: This article explores the popularization of gender reveal parties and considers what they can tell us about current societal expectations around gender, parenthood, and consumption. Gender reveal parties are events in which expectant parents reveal, or even learn, the sex of the child-to-be through a surprise display of something pink or blue, typically using innocuous means such as confetti, balloons, or a coloured cake. However, methods for revealing fetal sex have become increasingly bizarre and dangerous, involving firearms, car fires, and, in at least one case, an alligator. This article examines digital media depictions of gender reveal parties and their aftermath; discusses sexing technologies and diversity in biological sex and gender; looks critically at how capitalism and the White neoliberal state have constructed the gender reveal party as a performative event for parents-to-be; and explores the physical and affective violence done to individuals, families, and the natural environment by gender reveal parties.

Keywords: gender reveal, gender, parenthood, capitalism, biological sex

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During her third pregnancy in 2006, Louise A. Gosbell (2016) found herself routinely fielding question about the fetus' gender by well-meaning friends and family. Because she had already had two girls she was often asked if she was hoping that her third child would be a boy, and if she would be disappointed with another girl. Gosbell found these questions upsetting but brushed them off by telling the inquirers that she had chosen not to find out the sex of the child in advance, to which many would respond, “Well, it doesn't matter if it's a boy or a girl, so long as it's healthy” (p. 100). These interactions that Gosbell recounts illuminate several social narratives that frame parenthood, family, gender, and ability. Among these narratives are assumption of binary sex and gender (Preves, 2013), the conflation of sex and gender (Fausto-Sterling, 2013), the script of “family balancing” (Seavilleklein & Sherwin, 2007), ableist discourses and a centering of productive citizenship (Burman, 2017), and expectations around a mother's role in fetal and child development (Burman, 2017).

At the same time that Gosbell (2016) was defending her decision to not find out the sex of her unborn child, a new cultural phenomenon was about to arrive in North America. Gosbell's pregnancy and the casual conversations — with embedded complex discourses — that she had around the sex of the baby predated the popularization of a photo-worthy event wherein all these discourses could climactically come together: the gender reveal party. In 2006, when Gosbell was pregnant with her third child, the number of times the search phrases “gender reveal” and “gender reveal ideas” appeared was negligible, but Google Trends (2018) noted that in 2010 there was an uptick in searches. Over the next eight years, the search terms would skyrocket in the United States with the number of searches for each phrase respectively averaging 60,500 and 165,000 in March 2019 (Wordtracker, 2019).

The premise of a gender reveal party is that the expectant parents will hold a party at which the sex of the fetus is announced through a surprise display of something pink for a girl or blue for a boy. It is typical for expectant parents to not know the sex of the child and to have the obstetrician write down the sex and seal it in an envelope. The envelope is then taken to a person or professional who will assemble the materials for the “reveal”. Reveal examples include cakes that are coloured on the inside, confetti cannons, coloured balloons that emerge from a box, or more dramatic and dangerous means.

This article will provide an analysis of the sociocultural conditions under which expectant parents reify gender difference and perform “good” parenthood through gender reveal parties. I will discuss gender, biological sex, and sexing technologies; provide a survey of the ways the developmental model of childhood has placed parents and children under a social and state microscope; identify the impacts of social media and capitalism on how parenthood is performed; and analyze the sociocultural purpose of gender reveal parties by exploring their representation in online videos.

Gender, Sexing Technologies, and Disability

The term “gender reveal party” is a misnomer. While I have jokingly referred to them as “genital reveal parties”, they actually proclaim the likely sex of a fetus based on either or both of two non-invasive prenatal tests: (a) an ultrasound scan to detect the presence or absence of a penis, or assess the direction of the genital tubercle, at or after 12 weeks gestation (Odeh et al., 2009); and (b) a maternal blood test to identify the fetus’s chromosomes, as early as 4 weeks gestation (De Jong et al., 2010). Amniocentesis can also be used to test the fetus’s chromosomes, but because it carries a higher risk to parent and fetus than non-invasive prenatal testing does, it is now generally reserved as a method of confirming a suspected chromosomal abnormality (de Wit et al., 2017). Because biological sex is composed of a combination of chromosomes, genitalia, internal reproductive organs, sex hormones, gametes, and secondary sex characteristics (Ferber et al., 2013), these tests cannot guarantee, on their own or in combination, a biologically male or female child (Seavilleklein & Sherwin, 2007). Preves (2013) reported that, out of every 2,000 births, one or two babies are born with genitalia unaligned with “socially accepted norms of sexual anatomy” (p. 24). While the likelihood of accurately determining a fetus’s sex increases if both a chromosomal test and an ultrasound scan are consulted, a fetus with ambiguous genitalia could easily be assessed as phenotypically male or female in utero but be deemed intersex after birth. Additionally, because only one or two of the six components that make up biological sex are generally examined during a pregnancy, it sometimes happens that an intersex child (1% to 4% of all births¹) is born when a boy or girl is expected; in many cases, a person will not know they are intersex until puberty or later, or they may never know (Preves, 2013).

While determining the sex of a fetus is, ultimately, a best guess made by a healthcare provider, gender is an even more slippery and mutable category (Burman, 2017). Sex and gender are distinct categories, but they are not completely discrete: rather, they exist in a mutually informed and complex relationship with one another (Fausto-Sterling, 2013). Unlike sex, which is based on biological characteristics made meaningful by culture, gender is a personal, affective, and socially constructed category that cannot be properly applied to an individual without their input (Ferber et al., 2013). Gender identities include man/boy, woman/girl, and any of myriad trans and nonbinary genders. As such, a gender reveal party is, at best, a biological sex reveal party and, at worst, an event that contributes to the establishment and maintenance of a strictly gendered social order (Motzkau, 2009; Preves, 2013) into which a transgender or intersex infant may be born.

The more gender reveal party videos I watched, the more disturbing I found them. I was startled by the number that demonstrated disappointment when the child’s sex was revealed. One

¹ The wide range in the estimated number of intersex people is due to varying opinion on what constitutes “intersex”. While ambiguous genitalia is one of the most easily spotted examples of intersex, there are numerous other forms; those may impact, among other things, chromosomes, reproductive organs and gametes, hormone production, and the body’s response to hormones (Thyen et al., 2005). There is debate, especially in the area of variation in hormone production and hormone response, about who meets the criteria for being considered intersex, resulting in a wide range of estimates for the number of intersex people (Davis, 2015).

example showed an expectant mother and her two children popping silver balloons to reveal blue confetti. The mother gasps, scrunches her face, and yells disappointedly, “It’s a boy!?” Meanwhile, her teenaged daughter begins to cry beside her, presumably because she had been hoping for a sister. While the disappointment in this video was obvious and awkward, to an uninvolved observer the over-the-top reaction might have bordered on humorous. Another, more sinister, video showed two parents and a toddler opening a box that was supposed to release pink or blue balloons. Instead, rainbow balloons emerged. The parents did not share my delight at this flutter of queer glory — their upset at not seeing pink or blue was palpable. The mother looked shocked and the father balled up his fists and shook his head, saying, “I can’t believe this.” The toddler, instead of being excited by the miraculous appearance of balloons, silently and anxiously looked at the parents, as if trying to figure out how to react. These two videos, as well as thousands of others, demonstrate that to many families discovering the sex of the child in this way may be exciting, but can have unexpected emotional impact.

The evolution of sex-selection technologies adds a layer of complexity to the already fraught social underpinnings of gender reveal parties and the assumed correlation of sex and gender. While infanticide has a long history of use as a sex-selection method, it, along with sex-selective abortions, is largely seen as unethical across the globe (Seavilleklein & Sherwin, 2007; Whittaker, 2011). Having said that, there are still a significant number of sex-selective abortions and infanticides worldwide and across cultures; however, greater access to more covert forms of sex selection may obscure the rates of sex selection among wealthier populations (Vogel, 2012) and inaccurately suggest that communities of colour are the primary perpetrators of sex selection. Indeed, sex-selection technologies have advanced tremendously for White prospective parents who, on average, have greater access to wealth and healthcare technologies. These newer technologies are generally non-abortive, such as the microsorting of sperm by X and Y chromosomes followed by in vitro fertilization (Seavilleklein & Sherwin, 2007). We can infer that a person who seeks sex-selection technologies when they are trying to get pregnant is likely assuming that the eventual child’s biological sex and gender will align, and that the child will behave in particular gendered ways associated with their sex that fulfil prescriptive societal expectations of male and female behaviour.

Many of the tests used to sex fetuses are also used (sometimes primarily; de Wit, et al., 2017) in detecting chromosomal differences such as Down Syndrome (Kaposy, 2013). While the ethics of abortions based on fatal and nonfatal chromosomal difference in fetuses is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to briefly consider how forces that influence parental decisions around gender also come to bear on ability and disability. Slater (2013) observed that children with disabilities disrupt the “normal child” ideals inherent in the developmental model of childhood (Turmel, 2004). As such, a parent who chooses not to terminate a pregnancy that will produce a child with a disability can be framed as unruly for not upholding the tenets of social order that underlie developmentalism (Turmel, 2004): specifically, they are failing at the ableist expectation that parents should produce productive citizens who will contribute to the capitalist state.

Returning to Gosbell's (2016) experience of fielding questions about the sex of her unborn child, if a pregnant person truly does not have a sex preference but finds out that there are fetal "abnormalities", the gravity of the statement "it doesn't matter if it's a boy or a girl, as long as it's healthy" is brought into stark relief.

Performing Parenthood Under Capitalism

In the early 1900s, the emergence of the developmental model of childhood invited science, the state, and an increasingly educated public to scrutinize the minutiae of child-rearing and family life (Turmel, 2004). This scrutiny was done in the name of ensuring a "normally developed child" (Turmel, 2004, p. 420) who would progress along specific physical, emotional, and social trajectories believed to result in a productive and responsible adult (Burman, 2017). Such thinking, far from having disappeared, is still with us a century later. Iantaffi (2009) argued that parents, especially mothers (or, more specifically, birthing parents), are constantly being monitored by the people around them. Additionally, birthing parents and primary caregivers (often mothers) bear the burden of being the primary locus of judgement by their peers, care professionals, and the government, based on what Burman (2007) calls their perceived "success or failure in promoting [their] child's development" (p. 139).

Parents can find themselves having to contend with the advice or admonishment of family, friends, and even strangers, not to mention medical professionals, who are also susceptible to trends in public opinion. These observers are armed with popularized ideas about all facets of childrearing, and feel that closely monitoring the behaviours of pregnant people and new parents is their social duty (Burman, 2017). Among myriad other things, parents are expected to ensure optimal attachment with their newborns (though how they are to achieve this is highly debated; Burman, 2017). They face overt criticism if they do not successfully adapt to fluctuating trends regarding infant feeding, such as determining the socially acceptable age to stop breastfeeding, or conforming to trends or the latest studies pronouncing bottle, breast, or formula as the optimal way of ensuring proper child development (Burman, 2017). Parents must also contend with childcare advice being delivered through online content via bloggers, opinion pieces, and parenting apps, all of which allow for an unprecedented turnover in parenting trends on topics such as optimal disciplinary methods for ensuring resilient children, and the benefits or evils of sleep training (Burman, 2017).

Increasingly invasive social media and self-help apps are additional sources of guilt for parents and pregnant people (Johnson, 2014). Parents and expectant parents are under social pressure to use what Brown and Webster (2004, as cited in Johnson, 2014) called "socio-technologies" to consume and then publicly reproduce images of ideal parenting (Johnson, 2014). These technologies bring with them: a reminder to take your folic acid; a selfie of your sister-in-law drinking a green smoothie, accompanied by a status update letting you know that she is walking to her mamas'n'babies yoga class; a professional photograph of your friend's peacefully smiling, plump baby with a pink headband, complete with giant silk peony, artfully placed on its

bald head (“I just got this on Etsy!”); and, of course, a video of the climactic cake-cutting moment at your friend’s Pinterest-perfect pink-and-blue-mason-jar themed gender reveal party. While there is nothing inherently untoward about a mamas’n’babies yoga class, and although taking a folic acid supplement during pregnancy is a verifiably good idea (De-Regil et al., 2015), the exposure of new and expecting parents to the flood of curated content coming from advertisers, celebrities, and other parents on social media has become the primary means of constructing and “communicating ideal motherhood” (Chae, 2015, p. 504). Bound up in the construct of ideal motherhood is an expectation that good parents are those who are, at minimum, middle class, a position that Byrne (2006) argued is inextricably linked to Whiteness, thus positions the ideal parent as White.

In 1899, American economist Thorstein Veblen (as cited in Currit-Halker, 2017) coined the term *conspicuous consumption*, which takes the form of overt displays of wealth through items like fancy watches and sports cars. Currit-Halkett (2017) noted that, as the middle class in the United States flourished, Black and Latinx people have increasingly been able to demonstrate conspicuous consumption. She argued that, in response to this, wealthy and middle-class White people have turned to *inconspicuous consumption* as a new means of positioning themselves as the elite. In this case, inconspicuous consumption might take the form of only eating organic foods during pregnancy, attending yoga classes at a high-end studio (in a predominantly White neighbourhood), and being able to take the time off work to be able to breastfeed your child. Non-White parents are able to literally buy their way into the good graces of a society that espouses neoliberal values through particular kinds of consumption (Mukherjee, 2011). In this case, non-White parents can make purchases to bring them closer to an idealized parenthood by emulating the inconspicuous spending habits of the White elite. However, many of these forms of inconspicuous consumption require ongoing financial commitment (such as yoga classes) and are not sustainable by lower-income families, White or non-White. This is where the gender reveal party comes in: it provides a contained and finite way for expectant parents to signal upward class mobility, at a smaller scale but in much the same manner as celebrations like weddings have long been used to signal a family’s prosperity (Bloch et al., 2003).

While the conspicuous consumption required to purchase a flashy car may be considered economically irresponsible for a lower-income family, “getting ready for baby” is seen as a responsible allocation of funds. Throwing a gender reveal party may allow less wealthy parents to inconspicuously project affluence in a way that is socially acceptable, demonstrates “good” parenting, and does not entail ongoing financial commitments, like hiring a nanny, that would be hard to maintain. Parents-to-be may also regard money for non-permanent items like food and napkins as well spent because the evidence can be posted to social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram, which have become important venues for demonstrating “ideal motherhood” to others in one’s social circle (Chae, 2015).

Interestingly, the purchasing of consumer goods rises after the sex of the fetus has been disclosed (Barnes, 2015). In her discussion of the impacts of sex determination on the consumption

patterns of pregnant people, Barnes (2015) argued that ultrasound scans have impacted the ways fetuses are understood, and are used as a tool for “learning to see who exists in the world” (Haraway, 1997, as cited in Barnes, 2015, p. 372). That is to say, an ultrasound scan can serve to make the pregnancy feel more “real” (Barnes, 2015, p. 372), which elicits particular kinds of consumption by the pregnant person and their friends and family. This assessment aligns with the results of a study conducted in the wake of the popularization of fetal sexing technologies in the 1980s: Winestine (1989) reported that women who chose not to learn the sex of the fetus were more likely to focus on the state of being pregnant, and thought of motherhood as a future state, while those who chose to learn the sex of their fetus by way of amniocentesis were more likely to be preoccupied with “the object of the pregnancy” (p. 1021), that is, the baby.

Gender Reveal Parties and Masculinity

Gender reveal parties are highly gendered affairs not only in that they prepare the parents for the particular social and economic expectations associated with raising a boy or a girl, but also in the expectation that parents will perform gender at the party itself. While Pinterest, with its predominantly female user base (Gantz, 2013), is replete with handmade pink and blue theme and reveal ideas, there is also a phenomenon of fathers-to-be revealing the fetus’s sex through over-the-top displays of masculinity. When a friend of mine and her fiancé were expecting a baby, their gender reveal party involved the fiancé and his group of military friends donning their army fatigues, building a snow wall, and the father-to-be shooting a paintball gun at it. I was initially surprised at the violent tone of this reveal. However, I was easily able to find several videos online that also made use of paintball guns and firearms as part of the gender reveal.

At a gender reveal party in Louisiana, a father-to-be displayed his machismo by prying open the jaws of a live alligator (RM Videos, 2018). Once they were opened wide enough, he dropped in a watermelon. The alligator crushed the watermelon to reveal that it had been filled with blue jelly. I find reveals like these, couched in a particular kind of violent masculinity, to be quite haunting. I find myself left with this question: Once the baby is born, will gender roles be enforced as violently as the sex was revealed?

“Just an Excuse for Some Harmless Fun!”

I have heard repeatedly in conversation that expectant parents host gender reveal parties because they are “just an excuse for some harmless fun!”. However, there are ample examples of gender reveal parties being obviously and immediately harmful, including: a “burn-out” reveal in Australia in which coloured smoke came off the tires of a car, but also resulted in the car bursting into flames (Dixon, 2019); and an Arizona reveal wherein the father-to-be shot a target filled with blue explosives, leading to a 47,000 acre wildfire and 8 million dollars in damage (Avagnina, 2018).

Even in the absence of car explosions and wildfires, gender reveal parties are not harmless. We live in a world where sex and gender matter a great deal as evidenced by: the rapid production

and honing of sex-selection technologies (Seavilleklein & Sherwin, 2007), new and expectant parents gathering online claiming to be suffering from pathological “gender disappointment” on learning the sex of their child (Duckett, 2008; Whittaker, 2011), and the prevalence of the idea that “family balance” can only be achieved through having equal numbers of male and female children (Whittaker, 2011). A woman in a care profession told me that her husband and son had a special bond that she did not have access to because she doesn’t know “what it is like to have a penis” (personal communication, April 24, 2019). This is an example of the amount of power some give to genitals in dictating not only the kind of life they expect a child to have, but even what kind of relationship a parent of a particular sex can have with that child.

Even more telling than whether or not a parent expresses a preference for having a boy or a girl are the realities that the child may face depending on their sex and gender. The 2005-2006 Virginia Transgender Health Initiative Survey reported that nearly 45% of transgender adults had experienced gender-based violence, and 28% had made at least one suicide attempt (Goldblum et al., 2012). The Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey, which took place from October 1, 2013 to May 31, 2014, found that 70% of transgender youth reported having been sexually harassed, and one in three did not have an adult in their family they felt they could talk to (Saewyc et al., 2015). In 2010, research conducted by the Native Women’s Association of Canada documented 582 cases of missing or murdered Indigenous women and girls (Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women, 2014); in the 1993 Violence Against Women Survey, 39% of Canadian adult women reported having been sexually assaulted at least once since the age of 16 (Statistics Canada, 2006). Such societal ills provide a sobering context for the practice of holding gender reveal parties, which are laden with complex social discourses that take them out of the realm of “just some harmless fun”.

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