



Of Straddlers and Rebels: Growing Gender Diversity Among Millennials Is a Fact

Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Structure.
By Barbara J. Risman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 376 pp., \$99.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper). ISBN: 9780199324392

Daniela Jauk¹

Published online: 26 September 2018
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2018

Much has been written about “Gen(eration) Y,” typically defined as emerging adults born between the 1980s and early 2000s, also referred to as “millennials.” In the United States, descriptions of millennials have ranged from the self-centered *Generation Me* (Twenge 2014) to a community-focused, civically engaged generation that has helped establish new social movements, critically re-energized the country, and created a *Millennial Momentum* (Winograd and Hais 2011). Barbara Risman addresses a glaring gap in this ongoing debate by centering gender as an axis of analysis in the millennial experience. Her guiding research questions are: How is the gender structure understood today by the millennials? Are gender revolutions that have been sparked by the second women’s movement of the 1970s still blooming? Are we facing a retrograde political phase as conservative backlashes smother all attempts at gender innovation?

Gender structure in this context is not just a phrase, but also a nuanced, multidimensional theoretical framework on which Risman has worked for much of her career as a sociologist. After an introductory chapter, she presents a thoroughly revised version of her model Gender as Social Structure. It offers a viable option for scholars who want to bring power differentials and macro-level analyses back into focus. This revival is particularly important because gender is individualized in contemporary media and scholarly discourse, which creates new opportunities for agency and liberation, but it is also depoliticizes structural inequalities and oppressions.

Risman contextualized her framework within a comprehensive and accessible history of the concept of gender in the social sciences. In her model, she synthesized much of prior feminist thought on gender at individual, interactional, and macro levels of analysis. In doing so, she explained how, on every level, we should be concerned with the recursive relationships between cultural and material processes. For example, on the individual level, material aspects concern the body, whereas cultural aspects focus on identities and socialization processes. The interactional level comprises representation, access to social networks, material aspects, stereotypes, cognitive biases, and expectations on the cultural level. On the macro level, researchers are encouraged to look at the distribution of resources and institutional rules, as well as hegemonic beliefs and institutional logics, to capture cultural aspects of the model.

The model is a thought-provoking prism through which Risman analyzes the narratives of 116 millennials. Before Risman dives into her main findings (Chapters 5–8), she reviews research on millennial culture (Chapter 3). She also provides a straightforward methods chapter in which she describes the research that constitutes the book’s foundation (Chapter 4). In these two chapters, Risman demonstrates how her research is feminist not only in her theoretical approach, but also in the collaborations she built with students and colleagues. I find the data collection processes intriguing—specifically the ways in which the researchers tried to generate narratives to address all three theoretical levels through multiple prompts: interview questions, vignettes, an image of a controversial ad, and a news article.

The sample has a great deal of ethnic and racial diversity to offer. In the mainly middle class, college-centric, convenience sample, there are very few parents, and it lacks class diversity as well, which together makes the sample and study less intersectional than the theoretical framework allows. Nevertheless, the study offers thought-provoking insights and new

✉ Daniela Jauk
daniela@jauk@orianahouse.org

¹ Oriana House, Inc., Akron, OH, USA

vocabulary to negotiate a world that is becoming more gender-diverse, yet also remains unequal on many levels.

In her analysis, Risman derives four idealtypes designed to bring order to the complicated life stories that reflect participants' positionality toward and within the gender structure. These include True Believers, Innovators, Rebels, and Straddlers. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the idealtype True Believers, which is a group of millennials who embrace the status quo and believe in a gender ideology in which women and men ought to be different. Most of them embrace religious rules that enforce gender differentiation, and they are usually raised in fundamentalist religions. One notable deviation here is the fact that all women in Risman's sample are striving for employment and financial independence, which stand at odds with traditional fundamentalist gender roles.

The Innovators (Chapter 6) and the Rebels (Chapter 7) both critique the gender structure, but the Rebels go further than the innovators in their disregard for the constraints of gender on and desire to dismantle the gender binary. Risman thinks of the Innovators as "traditional feminists" (p. 150): They strive for equality between women and men, have a focus on shared responsibilities and freedom from stereotypes, but are comfortable with the gender binary. The Rebels are composed of individuals who identify as male, female, or genderqueer/non-binary who are "...efficacious. If they do not feel comfortable in their culture, or in their bodies, they either try to change the world, or themselves" (p. 159). The narratives reveal diverse lives on the full range of the gender spectrum, but also paint a picture of severe gender policing, as well as institutional and organizational discrimination.

The biggest group in the sample are the Straddlers (Chapter 8) who are characterized by inconsistency in their conception of gender. A good example of a Straddler is "James" (p. 213 f.), who was assigned female at birth and transitioned to live as a man. At an individual, material level, he clearly rejects essentialist notions; however, in his narrative it becomes evident that on an individual cultural level, he thinks that men and women are different. At an interactional level, he wants to socialize with men and enjoys cultural expectations of masculinity; yet on a macro level, he rejects gender socialization for children and wants everyone to be able to choose their own path. In summary, Risman concludes, "confusion is the new normal" (p. 254) because most narratives are full of contradictions.

In her concluding chapters, Risman applies her theory to the data she collected from millennials and calls for the abolition of gender as a social structure (Chapter 10). Risman asserts that neoliberal ideological hallmark of *all* respondents in her study is "the almost religious belief in their ability to be individuals and make free choices about their lives, including gender norms" (p. 105). The book is uplifting because Risman convincingly shows that the gender structure of millennials is dynamic. How gender is lived and (re)created by individuals is increasingly creative and diverse, and this is an uplifting and

liberating finding. Based on her findings, she calls for a fourth wave of feminism that moves beyond identity politics and thus gender altogether.

Another asset of the book is its versatility. Although its main purpose is to illustrate Risman's conceptual model of Gender as Social Structure, it will be of interest to researchers and practitioners in many fields. For example, it is relevant to qualitative methodology classes across many disciplines. The writing engages the reader in almost a conversational style. As the reader, I often pictured myself in a classroom with an energetic Professor Risman weaving together research findings and theories with personal information in an engaging web of active and vibrant language (which is good feminist research practice). Risman is clearly a seasoned sociological storyteller with an uncanny knack for making qualitative research interesting and accessible to a variety of audiences. Sociologists, women's studies scholars, feminist psychologists, social psychologists, educational psychologists, and industrial/organizational psychologists might find the book fascinating and useful. Human resources managers may draw on the book to help them improve workplaces for innovators and rebels, who may appreciate all-gender bathrooms, flexible parental leave regulations, and respectful language conventions.

Sex and gender diversity is indeed growing across the United States (Davis 2018). As I write the present review, Christine Hallquist, a transgender woman from Vermont, has just been confirmed as the first openly trans gubernatorial candidate (Nichols 2018), Danica Roem became the first openly transgender state legislator in Virginia last year (Abramson 2017), and multiple gender options on surveys and on social networking sites have become more common. Risman substantiates this shift, and she ultimately shows that even the True Believers have begun to modify their gender ideologies, even if they do so much less than all the other groups in her study.

References

- Abramson, A. (2017, November 9). Danica Roem is Virginia's first transgender elected official: Here's what she wants to accomplish. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/5016081/danica-roem-2017-elections-virginia-delegate-transgender/>.
- Davis, G. (2018, July 6). Sex and gender diversity is growing across the U.S. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/sex-and-gender-diversity-is-growing-across-the-us-98610>.
- Nichols, J. (2018, August 15). Christine Hallquist isn't just the first transgender candidate for governor—She's also a visionary progressive. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/christine-hallquist-isnt-just-the-first-transgender-candidate-for-governor-shes-also-a-visionary-progressive/>.
- Twenge, J. M. (2014). *Generation me-revised and updated: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled—and more miserable than ever before*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Winograd, M., & Hais, M. D. (2011). *Millennial momentum: How a new generation is remaking America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.