

‘Us against the world’

Navigating gender norms in romantic dyadic love relationships

Master’s Thesis

10.773 words

June 2024

Eline Annelisa Teunissen (641327)

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences

Master Engaging Public Issues

Under supervision of Prof. Dr. Willem Schinkel

With second reader Dr. Rogier van Reekum

Acknowledgement

First of all, I would like to thank all of the couples who shared their experiences with me in such honesty and openness. Without your participation, this thesis would be an empty shell. Then, writing this thesis would not have been such a wonderful experience if it was not for the support of the following people. Thank you Sabina Lukovic, Sharon Schouten, and Yan de Jager for our countless dinners, lunches, drinks, and chats. Your support has been uncensored and unsurpassed. Next, I would like to thank all members of the thesis group for making every session one of mutual interest and care. Also, a special thanks to Willem Schinkel for the on-point supervision and for transforming every ounce of my knowledge through this Master's Programme. And last, but most definitely not least: a thank you from my heart to Robin Lommerde for his tireless love and support.

Abstract

Gender is highly emphasized in Western societies, such as in the Netherlands. Traditional heteronormative ways of living are still very present, while feminist and queer movements have gained popularity over the last decades. This thesis provides insight into how gender norms as structures of power play out in dyadic romantic love relationships and how they navigate these norms together. The research is conducted by doing double interviews with nine couples — which are the combined lives of eighteen people. They show that gender stereotypes and the weaponization of biological determinism are often imposed on them. They also impose this on themselves, which reveals how gender norms are internalized to such an extent that they are experienced as dispositions of their identity. But regardless of how rigid or fluid couples have constructed their togetherness, no one appears to be fully satisfied with gender norms. Some couples illustrate a pressing will to challenge gender norms due to experiences of perceived injustice and are explicitly troubling them, other couples do so more subconsciously and implicitly.

Keywords: dyadic romantic love relationships, gender norms, gender trouble, performativity, power structures

“There can be no love without justice.”

– bell hooks

Introduction

Over the past decades, feminist fights have been waged for reproductive rights, equal pay, violence against women, acknowledging intersectionality, and much more. Yet, the resistance against traditional gender norms causes pushback in itself. This becomes materialized in the ‘trad wives’ movement, which is about women adhering to traditional gender roles; going back in time to the set of norms where women are the homemakers, depending on the income of the man (Campion & Ingram, 2023). This shows that traditional gender norms, shaped by the contexts of the reign of heteropatriarchy in Western societies, are still highly contemporary. Some women’s response to the gendered inequalities this brings along is (wanting) to become a trad wife as this ‘solves’ the problem of having to navigate existence in a society with so many gendered inequalities (NPO 3, 2023). This traditional heteronormative way of living is getting increasing attention in the media, while feminist movements also gain popularity.

Gender is highly emphasized in Western societies, which often adhere to the idea that distinctions between men and women stem from their biology or physical characteristics. Consequently, society automatically dictates a gender that comes with one’s sex (Sultana, 2012; Walby, 1991). Based on this man/woman-dichotomy, societal roles and attitudes are assigned. These blueprints for acting according to a gender are internalized to such an extent that they are often experienced as personal dispositions (Wood & Eagly, 2009). Conforming to them is beneficial, as doing so is rewarded with societal approval and contributes to a positive self-perception within the cultural context of the West. It secures social validation and enhances self-esteem (Eagly, 1987; Witt & Wood, 2010). But the contrary is also true, as Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) describe; with these normative rules come a lot of issues. Limiting personalities to strict boxes creates a restrictive environment that stifles identities. The feeling of being compelled to conform to gender norms creates the suppression of an authentic self. Such a conformity-driven environment can result in feeling pressure, anxiety and loss of

identity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Choosing not to conform to gender norms, however, brings constant societal pushback, like prejudice or violence. Just like conforming to prescribed gender roles, deviating from them can also be detrimental to someone's self-esteem, can result in depressive symptoms and brings higher suicide risks with it (Lowry et al., 2018; Zentner & Von Aufsess, 2022). Despite this, disrupting current gender norms gets increasing attention. Judith Butler appeals for ways to disrupt this binary view of sex and gender through the notion of gender trouble: challenging gender categories by not adhering to social expectations. This famous work in queer theory, 'Gender Trouble' (1990), lets readers rethink the fundamental sex and gender categories in the modern world and provides food for thought about how questioning identities can help change society. Butler argues that through the performativity of gender roles, they become real and through perceiving it as real they are performed. So gender is not a natural or stable phenomenon, but one that is constructed through repetition of performing it. Old ways can thus be changed and gender trouble can help to abolish them (Butler, 1990; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

To create an environment in which people are free to self-identify we can look at love relationships. Morgan Scott Peck describes a definition of love in his book 'The Road Less Traveled' (2003), namely: "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth". bell hooks draws upon this idea of love in her famous work 'All About Love: New Visions' (2001), exploring the transformative potential of love. In her work, love is not merely a romantic sentiment but also a powerful force that can contribute to personal and in consequence societal transformation.

The nonetheless enduring persistence of contemporary forms of traditional norms raises questions about the complexities of navigating gendered societal expectations. Love relationships are especially interesting to look at, since "love is a perfect place to study culture

in action” (Swidler, 2001, p.2). This thesis aims to show how deeply engrained gender norms as a social system of power are in dyadic romantic love relationships and, most importantly, how people try to challenge it. The main question asked, is as follows: *How do people in dyadic romantic love relationships navigate gender norms?* In which gender norms pertain to (the shaping of) gendered identities in relationships and the presence of power through divisions and positionality. The definition that is used of navigation is based on the one defined by Henrik Vigh (2009) and is about “how people act in (...) uncertain circumstances” with a focus on “how they disentangle themselves from confining structures.”

This thesis contributes to existing literature by providing insights into the ways in which gender norms as power systems influence the dynamics of people in dyadic romantic love relationships. This research takes a more intersectional approach of gender in answering the main question by interviewing people in love relationships that are situated and positioned in different gendered ways in respect to each other. This way, a more complex idea of identities is acknowledged. The significance of this study lies in archiving the spaces where traditional and progressive ideologies intersect and how they play out in dyadic romantic love relationships.

Firstly, this thesis discusses the existing theory on the subject in a theoretical framework. Next is the methods section which elaborates on why the used method is chosen and how the study is operationalized. After that, the analysis of the interviews are discussed, showing the lived experiences through recurring themes with existing theory. Lastly, points of improvement will be made and the conclusions will be presented.

Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework aims to explore the dynamics of dyadic romantic love relationships, focusing on the power structures of gender norms and gender trouble, and how this works out

in dyadic romantic love relationships. It offers insights into existing theory on how gender norms are shaped and act out in dyadic romantic love relationships.

Power structures

Looking at gender norms through the lens of power mechanisms shows that it maintains hegemonies within societies through privileging some groups and disadvantaging others. In the case of the Netherlands, with its Western culture, it privileges a group of white men and disadvantages others, like women (Brenner & Ramas, 1984; Vogel, 2013). An intersectional lens, shows that oppression and privilege is not only based on gender but can entail many intersections. When seeing gender in light of power structures, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which it is intertwined with other forms of social hierarchies, such as: race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, (dis)ability and many more (Collins et al., 2021).

This power is not a possession but a finely meshed network, as argued by Michel Foucault (1976). These ‘meshes of power’ change through time and culture and they shape people’s thoughts, identity, actions and interactions. The mechanisms of power also function through institutions, control systems and the overall production and reproduction of knowledge (Foucault, 1976; Potter, 2010). According to Foucault, there is “multiplicity of power”: power is not monolithic but knows many different forms which are all interconnected. These versions seem similar on an abstract level but differentiate from each other in particular contexts (Foucault, 1976; Lawlor & Nale, 2014). And so the power structures of gender should also be seen in an intersectional and juxtaposing light with other systems of power, such as race and class (Lorber, 2001). Foucault (1995) argues that the mechanisms of power are techniques to be mastered to keep power in the hands of hegemonies that benefit from it. An example of this is the internalized disciplining of gender, which is – consciously or subconsciously – used to regulate and control people by giving them certain attributes and roles according to their sex. Discipline operates through established norms by welcoming everyone that adheres to the

norms and punishing anyone that deviates from them.

Gender is managed through discipline so that it doesn't become too transgressive. Foucault (1976) argues that effort is made to make people live their gender in order to create identities that are easily controlled. Even more so, through processes of self-regulation, the policing of discipline has been mastered to a further extent; it is even taking place in our own heads and in interactions with others (Foucault, 1976). But when someone deviates from the norms despite all this policing and disciplining, the system fails to comprehend this perceived deviation. To still manage people who deviate, science – and thus knowledge – can be twisted to create reason for it (Foucault, 1965). Science holds “the capacities to exclude experiences, practices, and languages that fell outside of their logics. [Foucault] sought to reveal that [certain people's] ranges of experience were ‘forced to be silent’ through categories and methods of analysis that either excluded or redefined them in terms consistent with reason and science,” (Turkel, 1990, p.172, drawing on Foucault, 1965). This scientific knowledge, in turn, provides the building blocks for our understanding of ‘the truth’ and influences how people act according to that knowledge.

Gender norms

What is known as ‘the truth’ is often seen as normal and what deviates seems in need of reasoning, as is illustrated above. Gender norms are determinants for the social meaning of action, out of which societal expectations and social roles are created (Sunstein, 1996). Assigning these norms to a person starts with assigning a sex category at birth, which then becomes a materialized gender through appearance and interaction. When someone's sex and gender fits the societal box of expectations, they are treated in line with their sex and often also member themselves as part of it (Lorber, 1994; Lorber, 2001). These blueprints for ways of acting are internalized to such an extent that they are experienced as dispositions. (Wood & Eagly, 2009). So, how people act is not a personal choice made in isolation, because gender has

infiltrated every social arrangement in people's lives (Connell, 1987).

It is important to look at the foundation of gender norms and repertoires. These norms on genders are not set; their societal expectations vary per culture, time and context. Queer and feminist theories show that gender is made from culturally defined fictions associated with sex (Bettcher, 2014; Butler, 1990; Lorber, 2001). Even though it has been widely argued that this is the case, sex is still seen by many as a prediscursive 'natural law' that is not linked to gender. Though, if this were really the case, gender would be a floating set of ideas that anyone could choose to adopt without issue – for example a man with a 'women's gender set' (Butler, 1990). But paradoxically, as Butler shows, presuming a dichotomous gender system keeps a belief in place that gender will and must mimic sex (Butler, 1990). This would mean that gender and sex are after all mirroring each other or are at least influenced by each other; sex is then just as constructed as gender.

Even though gender is not pre-given biology, the material existence of gender constructions should not be denied. Bettcher (2014), drawing on Butler, highlights that heterosexual gender beliefs are inherently instable and that this is attempted to be concealed through the standpoint of biological fact: "While it purports to be grounded in a naturally gendered core, it amounts to nothing more than repeated attempts to imitate past instances of gendered behaviour." So, despite presenting itself as naturally grounded, it is essentially a repetition of learned behaviour according to past performances. It involves continuous effort to maintain these assimilated norms (Bettcher, 2014; Butler, 1990). So gender cannot only be seen as cultural ideas based on, and only after defining, a sex. Rather, it is productive to see it in light of a mechanism of power that wants to keep certain norms in place.

Butler (1990) argues that through this performativity of gender roles, they become real and through this realness, they are being performed. According to Butler, gender is not a natural or stable phenomenon, but one that is constructed through repetition. And thus, norms can be

deconstructed. Butler advocates for ‘gender trouble’, which are actions that disrupt the binary understanding of sex and gender (1990). It involves challenging societal norms and expectations through action and conversation. Questioning these contemporary forms of traditional identities can lead to societal transformation and is therefore significant in reshaping understandings of gender and its societal implications (Butler, 1990; Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

Romantic dyadic love relationships

Power structures create hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, which are fundamental aspects that are found in many different formations of relationships in societies (Simmel, 1896). The dynamics of superior and inferior interconnections are not what follows from society but are an integral part of it; societies are formed through interactions and socialization. Even though power dynamics seem one-sided, Simmel argues that they exist on the basis of reciprocal interactions (1896). Just as people navigate and negotiate their own positions in societal power formations, couples in love relationships do so as well. How people live together and how they love is inherently social and cultural (Swidler, 2001). Understanding dynamics of power in broader society gives parallels to romantic love relationships; the interactions in these relationships show how culture is used and linked to experiences (Swidler, 2001). Drawing from societal power structures of gender norms give tools to examine power dynamics in love relationships.

Simmel argues that the smallest sociological group consists of two: a dyad. The dyad and the triad differ significantly from each other; stating that a social structure of two, the dyad, only has two optional relationships (in balance or hierarchical) and a social structure of three or more, a triad, has infinite options in its structure. A dyad depends on both elements to exist and requires immediate interactions between the two individuals, making it a “super-individual unit” (Simmel, 1908, p.385). A dyad is unique in the sense that when one of the two falls out

(either physically or psychologically), the whole dyad ceases to exist (Poole & Billingsley, 1989; Simmel, 1908).

Many would argue that what keeps these relationships together is love. The notion of love is a construct with many dimensions which form people's actions, feelings and thoughts (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). Looking at love the way Morgan Scott Peck (2003) does, helps to explain why people would not only act out of an egocentric viewpoint: "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth". Paul Johnson (2007) describes this role of romantic relationships not as an outcome of a predetermined sexuality, but as a means to explore how love brings identity to life.

Despite of the two individual grounds a dyadic romantic love relationship exists on, it is important to simultaneously see that it still involves participation in broader social structures, which influence and shape the dyad (Simmel, 1908). Such relationships have been shaped, for example in the form of Western cultural marriage, to serve broader hegemonic structures by subjugating women to men and creating motive for passing on private properties (Engels, 1884; Ilouz, 1997). These hegemonic norms have been leading in what relationships should look like – a capitalist utopia of heteronormative romantic consumerism practices (Ilouz, 1997). Despite the paradoxical nature of dismantling norms within such normative-constructed environments, like dyadic romantic love relationships, it can be questioned whether it is possible to break the norms they uphold through gender trouble as discussed before.

Even though the above capitalist sentiment about romantic love has been made material, love has a transformative potential because of the space it creates for change (hooks, 2001; Scott Peck, 2003). Simultaneously, broader structural movements, like feminist fights, have set a base of attention for changing the norms that surround gendered hierarchies and oppression. Combining the transformative potential of love and the ground work of feminist attention, a foundation is laid for gender trouble in dyadic romantic love relationships. Normative

understandings of gender get disrupted through the questioning and contesting of gender categories by, for example, parody, self-criticism, and exaggerations to expose their performative nature (Butler, 1990). Through deviating from gender expectations by embracing multiplicity in their gender identity, people can grow out of normativity and into self-identification.

Methods

To answer the research question ‘*How do people in dyadic romantic relationships navigate gender norms*’? I have chosen a qualitative based research design, using in-depth and semi-structured double interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The choice for double interviews has been made due to the nature of the research question, which emphasizes the navigation of societal norms between the two partners and their experiences.

The informants were found through a snowball effect and are from the primary and secondary network of the researcher; I asked family, friends, and friends from friends to spread the word and contacted thirteen couples myself, some of whom declined. Due to the chosen sampling strategy and the limited amount time, I mostly focused the sampling criteria for this research on the amount of years couples are together and on not solely interviewing heterosexual couples. In the end six out of nine couples were heterosexual, three were queer. A combination of different viewpoints, from normative ones to deviating ones, shows the expected differences but also gives insights in unexpected similarities. All informants have their own idiosyncratic identities and take on unique combinations in adaptations of social norms. Seventeen out of eighteen people all have a Dutch nationality (one person has a British nationality but has lived in the Netherlands for six years), are studying or have completed a theoretical education (Hogeschool or University). Most of them have relatively well paying jobs or are still studying, or have a partner that does. Not all couples live together currently:

seven out of nine do, of which two also have a child.

In total, I conducted nine interviews. These interviews took approximately an hour and forty-five minutes with outliers of an hour and fifteen minutes and two hours and fifteen minutes. The interviews took place either in my house or in theirs, with two exceptions of online interviews due to distance and time. To prepare for the interviews I created a table of operationalizations (appendix 1), which focuses on a situation sketch of the relationship, experiences with gender norms as power dynamics, and gender trouble, based on the theoretical framework. This table provided a base to start the research process with. I chose two sub-themes to base the questions on, namely 1) the interplay of power structures of gender norms in dyadic romantic love relationships and 2) gender trouble in dyadic romantic love relationships. From this, I carefully assembled a list of questions using the theoretical framework and the works of Swidler on love and the affects of culture (Swidler, 2001). These questions were used in an iterative way; after each interview I rethought topics and questions whenever I considered it necessary (Knott et al., 2022).

To process the interviews, I conducted a thematic analysis in Atlas.ti to identify common themes and patterns of meaning: firstly, a round of open coding which was then divided under themes in a round of axial coding. A selection of themes and codes, combined with the theoretical framework, was used to analyze the findings. If I considered a need for more theory beyond the theoretical framework, it was added to the analysis. In the interviews and analysis I considered the intersecting identities and social gender positions of the two partners, acknowledging the influence that their socialization and current positionalities have.

All respondents have signed a consent form (appendix 2) to agree with the recording, transcribing and analyzing of their responses, as well as to my use of pseudonyms throughout the process. The recordings were transcribed by transcription software and the transcripts are stored behind a password. Because of the intersectional method, special attention was paid to

the informants' gender intersections and other intersections that arose during the conversations. Furthermore, to the extent possible, I made extra efforts to create an open and caring conversational space in which people feel free to discuss their relationship. This is also the reason for the previously mentioned length of the interviews. As the researcher, I have made personal efforts to have introspection into the biases I bring to the conversation. In any cases that these biases were noticed, they were made transparent by or to me. I encouraged the couples to ask each other questions if they felt like it. This created a conversation among three people instead of an interviewer-interviewees setting.

Analysis

In the warmth of their home or mine, I spoke with nine couples about their life together. I listened closely to the stories of eighteen people about memories of their childhood, personal encounters with stereotypes of gender norms, how they design their togetherness and what their views on their current situation are. Below is an overview of the characteristics of the couples spoken to (table 1). The names are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Table 1

Characteristics of the couples spoken to

<u>Couples</u>	<u>Together for</u>	<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Sexuality</u>	<u>Structure</u>
Couple 1	2 years	HBO student	<u>Heterosexual</u>	<u>Monogamous</u>
Margriet (25) (she/her) Max (27) (he/him)		Senior engineer		
Couple 2	3,5 years	Waiter at a coffeeshop	Queer	<u>Monogamous</u>
Ruby (26) (they/them or she/her) Jay (25) (they/them or he/him)		Waiter at a coffeeshop and illustrator		

Couple 3	4,5 years	Master's student	<u>Heterosexual</u>	<u>Monogamous</u>
Rosa (23) (she/her) Rens (24) (he/him)		Master's student		
Couple 4	8 years, engaged	HBO student and teacher English	Queer	<u>Non- monogamous</u>
Mika (24) (they/them or she/her) Ruben (26) (he/him)		Freelance journalist		
Couple 5	2 years	Teacher English	<u>Heterosexual</u>	<u>Monogamous</u>
Maeve (29) (she/her) Milan (30) (he/him)		Project engineer		
Couple 6	11 years, married	HR advisor in education	Heterosexual	<u>Non- monogamous</u>
Sabine (34) (she/her) Rowan (36) (he/him) <i>with a 2 y/o child</i>		Freelance <u>videomaker</u>		
Couple 7	11 years, married	HR employee for an IT company	Heterosexual	<u>Monogamous</u>
Femke (27) (she/her) Lars (34) (he/him) <i>with a 1 y/o baby</i>		Architect		
Couple 8	7 years, married	Legal advisor at a municipal office	<u>Heterosexual</u>	<u>Monogamous</u>
Natalie (29) (she/her) Paul (29) (he/him)		Policy maker at a national Ministry		
Couple 9	4 years	In between work and studies	Queer	<u>Non- monogamous</u>
Tessa (24) (she/her) Thijs (24) (they/them or he/him)		Master's student		

All of these couples seem to be in a happy place with each other, but all experience challenges related to gender norms and their power structures. For some, current gendered structures feel true to their experiences. For others, it feels like they live in a world that is not made for them because they fall out of the binary sex and gender dichotomy. Either way, everyone presented me with instances that had harmed them or their significant other and created, in different ways, an 'Us against the world' atmosphere. This reflects a shared perception among partners that they face societal pressures and inequalities together through

forming a united front against external judgments and expectations. For Ruby (they/them or she/her) and Jay (they/them or he/him) who both navigate gender transitions (MTF and FTM), this external world is particularly tiring and, as Ruby states, “when I got home and closed the door, the world around me didn’t exist. I could be myself and didn’t have to justify it to anyone. Being together with [Jay] still gives me that same feeling.” This reflects that they see themselves as a separate entity (an ‘us’) in a larger societal framework (‘the world’).

External challenges: disciplining gender norms

The couples all face societal pressures that happen outside of their relationship; in other settings and with other people. These pressures are pervasive reminders of the norms and can be seen as power operating through techniques that are mastered by those in control to keep power in their hands, as shown in the theoretical framework (Foucault, 1976). One practice of techniques is the disciplining of gender, which controls and regulates people by assigning the roles and identity of a gender based on their sex (Foucault, 1995). The couples spoken to have told me about many forms of this practice of disciplining in action, which were for some very influential in keeping them in a place that conforms to gender hierarchy, and for others less so. The most frequently discussed experiences of disciplining had to do with the weaponization of biology and the projecting of stereotypes. Specifically reoccurring were the experiences and stereotypes that negatively impact people that society sees as women. These are as follows: feeling unsafe while walking at night (Margriet, Rosa), jokes implying expectations of childbirth and reproductive responsibilities (Maeve, Natalie, Femke, Sabine), and work or school related stereotyping and structural boundaries, such as the glass ceiling (Natalie, Margriet, Femke, Rosa). Often in these stereotype-reaffirming encounters, the biological stand point is used to justify gender norms and their roles and expectations. This enforces boundaries that keep people on their given binary side. The disciplining of gender norms through weaponization is very visible in both the heterosexual and queer couples spoken to.

Sabine (she/her) and Rowan (he/him) often experience actions of people trying to push them into their assigned box of gender norms. With a two year old child, Sabine and Rowan have designed a relationship in which they help each other out. Rowan makes it clear that it is for practical and principle reasons: “You want to divide the work and not let everything go to [Sabine] because she is the mother. But we also do it out of principle to just break these conventions.” For them, this means sometimes stepping over their societal gender boundaries: while it is typically assigned to the mother, Rowan is the first contact person for their child care facility and goes to the consultation agency. Stepping over these boundaries gives them significant push back: while Rowan is the first contact person, Sabine is the one they always call first. “[Our child] has been in three different child care facilities and in all three cases they call the mother first,” Sabine highlights. Which means she gets interrupted at work and needs to ask them to call the father. Child care workers tend to respond to this by asking her if she can call her husband, giving her extra work. This is a fight that also creates the dilemma of choosing between having an argument or going into action for her child. It highlights how being born as female with the ability to birth creates expectations of naturally performing the role of the mother, which means to take up all emotional and care-related labour.

A biological view on gendered performances reinforces these roles and ignores the capacity for both parents to share the parenting load. Rowan has experienced the other side of this. To take the burden off of Sabine, he goes to the consultation agency but is met with people highlighting his seeming lack of knowledge because he is not the mother. Sabine describes the following, to which Rowan agrees: “One care professional deals with his presence better than another. But there have been strange reactions when he told them how breastfeeding was going. The reaction he got back was: ‘how would you know anything about that?’. Although [our daughter] latches onto my breast, [Rowan] can still know how that is going. It is also his child.” These weaponizations of biology restrict Sabine; she gets disrupted at work and has to spend

energy and attention on it. It also restricts Rowan by discouraging him to take on emotional labour and care.

Another way in which the power structures of gender norms are upheld through weaponizing biology is highlighted by the experiences of Ruby and Jay. Ruby's existence as a person in transition creates backlash, which is based on a mindset that men abuse their power positions and need to be distrusted: "The protective mechanism against men catches on because (...) [people] associate me with manhood. That is no shortcoming on my end, but is rather a logical fallacy, because they make an ungrounded association and link it to an ethical judgement of me." Jay experiences this in a different manner: "there is this idea that trans-masc people are always safe because they aren't men, even though they are men." They describe that even though they are in transition and are masculine, because of not having experienced a given position as a 'biological' male, they are seen as less dangerous. These examples expose the roles and power positions people automatically associate with the sexes assigned at birth.

Another tool to justify and perpetuate the power structures of gender norms and their roles and expectations is the use of stereotypes. Stereotypes recreate cultural gender differentiation, which has its base in biological determinism (Nadler & Lowery, 2018). In interactions these stereotypes can be communicated through jokes or through very serious assumptions. In the conversation with Natalie (she/her) and Paul (he/him), Natalie points out that she experiences getting pushed into a stereotype regularly, which can also limit her preferred ways of acting. Two lived experiences that she gives are based on the idea that she, as a woman, should take up the emotional labour and care: "It really bothers me when people go, 'oh, it does really suit you' any time I hold a baby. And these are small things, but they are there, they really are. (...) I am almost inclined to not go and play with the children, but I do want to build a connection with my nephews," she describes. Later on in the conversation, she tells that her mother-in-law took her aside "so I could put all of [Paul's] family's birthdays on

my calendar. [To Paul:] of your family, *your* family. (...) Like, ‘you [would] forget things like that because you’re a man and you shouldn’t burden yourself with that’.” These stereotypes undermine her own autonomy and reinforce gendered expectations. It affects her experiences and meaningful interactions.

These stereotypes happen for everyone I talked to in some way – there are too many to take them all into account. Rosa (she/her) and Rens (he/him) told me about another stereotype. Rosa is a vegetarian and Rens is not, which resulted in the following stereotypical joke: “‘Well, you should learn how to cook meat’, I know it is a joke but it is also kind of an expectation.” Through a joke Rosa is pushed back onto her side of gender norms, which in this case revolves around men as meat-eating beings and women as the homemakers, which includes cooking and keeping the man happy. Maeve (she/her) and Milan (he/him) have also experienced stereotypes, which impacted Maeve’s expectations. She grew up with sitcoms and (social) media and got the idea that “men only have five emotions. And that’s it. And well, it is not that I prepared for that but you almost just assume that it actually is the case and that it will be something that I would need to work on [in a relationship].” But this did not become reality for them, which Maeve shows her confusion for: “Weird that my standards were made low because in my real life, I mean my parents, they are very happy.”

The perpetuation of gender norms through stereotypes becomes evident in lived experiences as portrayed above. These stereotypes, whether meant as jokes or in earnest, put pressure on the couples to get them back behind their boundaries. Often these stereotypes are aimed at people who are seen as women. Their gender is consciously or subconsciously managed by people to push back on their transgressiveness. This also highlights the power that is wielded in weaponizing a biological disposition of a certain sex and how it creates an asymmetry in relationships. Weaponizing social gendered performances as biological

dispositions creates a justification to enforce stereotypes, which in turn reinforces inequality (DuBois & Shattuck-Heidorn, 2021).

Internal challenges: the household

The examples given in the previous section were all external to the couples' relationships. In spite of these external inequalities creating challenges, each couple strives to create an image of equality in their relationship. The couples that live together, which are seven out of the nine couples spoken to, all show the presence of shared responsibilities, and a respectful and supportive understanding between each other. They describe households that do not conform to 'traditional' gendered expectations. These seven couples illustrate how they run their households almost equally, while sometimes it can be more of a 65/35 division, in which case the woman does more. Most have divided the chores based on what they like to do the most. But in any case, the picture they were eager to paint for me is that of a modern household built on reciprocity and equality.

Still, within this equality there are big differences in how the households of the people spoken to are structured. On one end of the spectrum there is Margriet (she/her) and Max (he/him) who do not really structure their household: "We don't have lists or rules, it's just as it goes. (...) And we both know when the laundry piles up it has to be done," as Max describes. They both agree that they have a 50/50 division. But in the conversation Max hesitantly questions Margriet on what she thinks of their division of working compared to house work in the context of Margriet still studying and Max working fulltime: "But more like, how do you think things are going in terms of combining everything? I work quite a lot, and you're often at home. But I do feel like, even though you're at home a lot, we share things equally." To this, Margriet states that she wants to work too after she graduates. The initial steadfast agreement to equality transforms into a hesitant negotiation. This shows that the topic about fairness of balancing reproductive house work is a sensitive one for them. So even though they believe in

an equal split, their positions create an imbalance in practice. Their division of household labour is unplanned and informal but there is still a need for continual negotiation of responsibilities, which does not make it as unstructured as they want it to appear to be.

On the other end are Femke (she/her) and Lars (he/him). They have a to-the-detail-planned household because that is, as they discuss, the only way they can structure a life with a one year old baby and working 32 hours a week each. “It is almost not plannable. It is always a challenge to be on time,” describes Femke. Lars sums up their strict evening routine: “Before the time you get home it’s already six o’clock (...) and her bed time is at seven. [In between that time frame] it is a bottleneck: she needs to take a bath and needs to get a bottle before that while we also have to cook and put [her] to bed.” Both agree that they have a 50/50 division of reproductive labour in the household. The amount of tasks it is not equally divided, but the sum of work is, according to them. Femke takes up more of the “thinking tasks”, such as making a list of and ordering the groceries for the week. Lars ascribes this mental responsibility to Femke because she likes to plan in advance. To this, Femke reacts: “Yes, I do like to plan in advance. Surely I can handle last minute things but I prefer not to, so I automatically take it out of his hands. It’s not that he doesn’t want to help; it’s just his slower pace. But Lars tends to do more of the ‘real tasks’, like: picking up the groceries, putting the garbage outside, unloading the dishwasher, and doing maintenance chores.” This outplay of division of reproductive labour shows – at least in way of speech – what “real tasks” are and what is considered more inferior. Even though Femke shows that Lars does not do the planning tasks the way she would like it, she vouches for him by making a value judgement about his tasks and devaluing her own tasks, which involve more of a thinking process. This thought process is aligned with the historical undervaluation of reproductive and care work (Diprose, 2017), and shows a dynamic of subconscious superiority and inferiority (Simmel, 1896). In this particular case it also shows that work with outcomes is seen as more valuable, while care and emotional work, which

demands significant cognitive effort but does not have similar tangible outcomes, is often underappreciated.

Both of these households, on either end of the spectrum, adhere to an ideology but have difficulties to make it a reality; there is a discrepancy between ideology and practice. While Margriet and Max negotiate how to structure their unstructured ways, Femke and Lars, do not actively negotiate the fundamentals of how to structure their rigid structures.

Of whom consists the ‘Us’

All couples experience issues with gender norms in some way. This can be the case through the above mentioned ways of externally imposed stereotypes or through negotiations of reproductive work. To form a sense of what created their understandings, it is important to discuss what has shaped these relationships. For that, we should look at their socializations to reveal a more in depth image of the influence of socialization, identity formation, and how the people spoken to combine two lives in a state of togetherness.

When people come together and decide to share their lives, they both bring their own ways out of which they can choose which to perform and which not to. Of course, everyone's upbringing is uniquely layered, but there is a tendency to be seen: by far the most people I talked to come from a household with gender normative values. Their parental socialization almost always involved ways of teaching how to fit in the gendered structures of power. When this is not overtly the case, it can still be the case under the surface, as Femke shows. She has two younger brothers and describes her socialization as similar to her siblings. “If my mother asked me to help make the bed, it would be the same if my brother was nearby. (...) And look, I did have Barbies and those kind of toys but we also had a lot of toy cars in the house. (...) I think, if I had grown up with two sisters, things might have been different. Then I would maybe not have liked cars.” But Femke also emphasizes that she grew up in a “very traditional family” with a mother that worked, overall very little, in healthcare and a (step)father that worked

fulltime and does not know how to cook, except for the occasional fries-day on Saturday. The primary responsibility for the household of the mother and the detachment from domestic work of the father – with fries on Saturday working as a token – gives the image that gendered spaces are reinforced within the family. So despite the overt engagement with both stereotypically feminine (Barbie dolls) and masculine (toy cars) toys which give Femke the idea that her upbringing was not that gendered, the covert context of the family dynamics suggests a reinforcement of traditional roles.

A valuable view on the internalization process of gender norms can be explored through the eyes of Mika (they/them or she/her). Even before they consciously knew they wanted to go into transition (MTF), the performance of gender roles in the household of their socialization was a way to become what is, in their eyes, a woman. “As a trans person, I just look at societal expectations. At some point, I simply internalized what it means to be a woman. (...) Very subconsciously I started thinking, 'Okay, this is part of being a woman, so I'll do this now.' And eventually, I became good at doing certain tasks that women are expected to excel at, just because I did them often and practiced a lot. (...) In my childhood, I also helped my dad quite a bit in the kitchen (...). I didn't know it then, I couldn't explain it with words like, 'Hi, I am a woman,' but I knew that girls were supposed to help in the kitchen, so I wanted to as well.” This process shows how gender socialization happens through performative actions even long before they are fully conscious of their gender identity. Normative gender roles can be internalized deeply and influence someone’s sense of self. Mika’s experiences underscore Butler’s theory (1990) that gender is performed through a repetition of action based on social gender norms. Despite being born in a world which considered Mika a man, through repeated performance of female gender roles, Mika found a way to strengthen their non-conforming gender identity. These two examples of Femke and Mika illustrate how socialization processes regarding gender norms do not have to happen on the surface or consciously. The context and structures of a

household have a big impact on the internalization of gender norms.

Jay, who grew up in the United Kingdom, sketches an image of a socialization in which they were not socialized into a given gender identity. They describe their upbringing as “never having to think about gender much in my childhood. This seemed to be the same for my parents. It never really seemed important until I went to school. Then all of a sudden I was surrounded by people with a gender and I was like ‘wow ok, what is this?’”. For Jay, gender was in the first place not a sleeve or badge they would wear; it was not part of their identity or at least it did not matter as such. Only when they started interacting with other children who had been socialized into a fixation on gender did it become apparent to them as well.

What these lived experiences of socialization show, is that there is no way around; if they were not socialized into adhering to gender norms at home, they have been in another setting. What becomes clear when comparing this section on socialization with the former section on couples’ own internal shaping of their togetherness is that they were sent on a path by their parents that was in different ways more conservative than how they have designed and are designing the relationship they are currently in. In many ways, people can consciously choose to not bring the structures from their socialization with them in their own relationship, but subconsciously these structures are already internalized through performative action.

Building upon this idea, Thijs (they/them or he/him) shows their own process to get out of gender normative structures. With their strict Christian upbringing, this was not smooth sailing. Going through a process of breaking out, fending and searching for new (political) beliefs, they created an identification as “radical feminist”. But Thijs’s actions did not catch up with their political stand points. This became apparent in the structures of Thijs’s and Tessa’s (she/her) relationship: “But then you realize at some point, you just have to admit, (...) ‘I just don’t see it that way, you know?’ (...) But yeah, I think I found it difficult to really see how much I am still caught in those patterns that I actually despise.” Their discussions often become

emotional and transcend practical matters. And as Thijs nuances: “It was also that apparently my ego was being affected. And you, [Tessa], also had trouble finding the right words because you felt that it touched me and your reaction was to hold back a bit.” What becomes visible here is that even if people consciously aim to create new relational patterns, they will still be influenced by biases and ingrained assumptions from their socialization. These efforts to change learned structures can cause confrontations, because it means that the presence of conditioned social gender norms need to be acknowledged.

Natalie highlights that this is a vicious circle: “People say ‘you just have to be yourself’ (...) but that usually isn’t afforded to children. If children say they are something, adults often think they know better and make choices for them. (...) Only when you become an adult and encounter more open-minded people – although there are many adults who aren’t – do you hear, ‘You’re just yourself. Why does there need to be a label?’ Because that’s what we learned. The world is structured that way, and people often ask for those labels.” She sketches that children learn to not be themselves but to conform, only to be told later in life that they really are themselves and shouldn’t conform. The latter part is built upon the structures of the gender norms that were learned in the first place.

Consequently, people can react to this cyclical nature of socialized identity in different ways. For some it means to search for ways to get out from under the social structures that they have learned at home out of principle and to address injustice. For others, the social environment they experienced is comfortable, and changing it is deemed unnecessary. As Maeve puts it in regards to her parents and upbringing: “why change a winning plan? If that worked out [for my parents] and I also feel comfortable with it [in my own relationship], then I am nice and traditional. I don’t mind it that much.” When the fit between identity and socialization is seamless, perpetuation is easy.

This highlights the presence of the privilege of not having to redefine your self in a way

that is deviant from societal expectations. This privilege is evident in Paul's life and identity: "I have always struggled with the idea of identity and having to self-identify. (...) Apart from saying 'I have a penis,' I have never really thought about it. I just don't focus on identity in that way. I don't understand those who question or doubt their identity." Natalie draws upon this by suggesting that Paul's ease in accepting his identity might stem from the fact that he has always felt at ease with the label given to him throughout his life. "I get that it's not relatable for you, that you don't have a sense of empathy for it because you have felt comfortable your whole life with the labels given to you," Natalie continues, "but I can think of countless situations in which someone gets a certain label with which they cannot agree."

To conclude, the couples' parents play(ed) a big role in shaping their identities. The couples are all socialized into gender normative structures to a different extent. And in the cases in which someone's socialization was not fixated on gender norms at home, it has been elsewhere, like in school. As they grow, get into a relationship with their significant other, and form their togetherness, they face challenges in choosing which parts of their socialization they keep and which ones they do not. There is a contradiction at play here, as because children are taught to conform to societal gender norms, only to be told as adults to be their authentic selves. This 'authentic self' was and is still shaped, creating a cycle that can be hard to break. Consciously rejecting gender norms can mean being confronted with the difficulty of overcoming these internalized gendered patterns. But when socialized gender norms fit well with personal comfort, there is little incentive to challenge them. This privilege can also show the inability to empathize with people who do struggle with their given identity, but this does not have to be the case.

Asymmetry of the 'Us'

Seeping through in what is discussed so far is the influence of societal structures that do very much shape these relationships. A dyadic romantic love relationship is not a simple binary of

two units, but a reflection of social gender norms in which there is at least some sort of asymmetry in hierarchies. The very concept of ‘us’ is embedded in an asymmetrical reality. What becomes clear when looking at relational spheres is that these are fully interconnected with any ‘external’ imposed ways of gender norms. That thus means that the previously mentioned external situations around relationship (stereotypes, socializations) and internal issues and designs (households) are not at all so external and internal. They are intertwined and affect each other. So how does the asymmetry of societal structures of gender norms show in the relationships of the couples I spoke to?

Disciplining ourselves

Experiencing the vast amount of weaponized interactions I was told about through the conversations with the couples, I can only assume that these are the very top of the iceberg. And since every story about socialization included the learning of gender norms, I noticed that these are to a big extent internalized. In all cases the meshes of power are visible in the couples and have become a disposition for some, even to the point that the differences between an authentic identity and one that is following the rules of gender norms has become inseparable. For some couples, disciplining gender has become their dispositions, which can feel very authentic.

The way couples face societal pressures is influenced by expectations, but these are so internalized that the disciplining of the power structures of gender norms becomes a self-regulated process through thought and interactions (Foucault, 1976). This means that partners can discipline each other and themselves. These pressures are based on feeling a need to adhere to gender norms – to fit in. A biological determination as fundament for their gender and identity is on the groundworks for Rosa and Rens. Rosa states that she is convinced that there are biological differences and that certain things are internally wired, like wanting to care for people. “I just think that a woman-brain and an man-brain are differently assembled. (...) And

I think that there are strengths and weaknesses in it but that these complement each other. And I appreciate that [Rens] (...) can take on a masculine role, like making decisive choices,” Rosa sketches. It shows how the practice of caring is seen as a trait tied to their sex, which gives the perspective that it is not recognized as a skill that can be developed by anyone regardless. Rens reacts: “I think you are totally right. If you for example look at taking risks, I think that a man would take risks sooner than a woman. Just like, I will take on another job or start for myself. If you look at my environment (...), it is always the men that start a business and I think that that is also a bit of a difference between men and women biologically.” Rens shows the discrepancy between biological determinism and gendered performances. Stating that the men in his environment start a business sooner than the women suggests that there is a social reproduction of what is known and what is taught. There are many more arguments to be made next to the biological one in perpetuating gendered inequalities, such as the discouragement of women to work, lack of support, or systemic barriers (Lorber, 1994; Lorber, 2001). Basing the ability of risk-taking on inherent biological traits, shows how the power structures of gendered boundaries are reinforced through a form of self-disciplining. Not paying attention to other reasons excludes or redefines people to be consistent with the logic that has been taught (Foucault, 1965; Turkel, 1990).

The same is seen in the pressure Ruben (he/him) and Mika feel to adhere to performing their gender. Ruben shows that he notices that Mika can be very insecure about how to express their identity. “[To Mika:] I think you could save five minutes spent standing in front of the mirror every day if you wouldn’t worry about [your chest] so much. (...) This pressure is internal to a certain extent, but is also of course – even more so lately – caused by the transphobia in society and that you are expected to meet a super arbitrary set of requirements in order to be considered legit. And even then, you are often not (...) considered to be a real woman.” Mika, too, discusses the ways in which Ruben feels pressure: he can be worried about

earning enough money. Even though worrying about money is based in their current financial situation, it is also based on gender normative performances. As Mika emphasizes: “[To Ruben] I get the idea that because of gender roles that are expected from you, you worry much more about money and the ability to take on the provider role. And preferably you would want to earn as much or more than me,” to which Ruben reacts, “Yes, that is true (...). But it’s also because you are doing it for me right now and I feel an imbalance. (...) I struggle a lot with the idea of being a provider. I want to have a lot of money in the bank, mainly for peace of mind, but also so I can buy nice things for you. It’s the equation of the man coming home in the evening with a bouquet of flowers for his wife.” Ruben’s desire to be financially stable is twofold: for his own peace of mind and to provide material benefits for Mika. The stereotypical metaphor Ruben uses is telling, buying stuff to demonstrate their care and appreciation is often seen as balancing emotional contributions in a relationship; men showing love and commitment through providing while for women it is through receiving.

The asymmetry of societal structures of gender is reflected in these lived experiences. The above examples of Rosa and Rens, and Mika and Ruben show that the line between authenticity and socially conditioned identity has become blurry. The disciplining of gender norms shows the pervasiveness of societal expectations on identity, which ultimately influences the design of their relationships.

Within and against

Interactions in which gender norms are at play have a great influence on how dyadic romantic love relationships are formed. While for many a focus on internal/external ‘us against the world’ principles arises, they are still situated within this Western gendered world. This dynamic can create a fixation within the relationship on negotiating gender norms in their interactions with each other and with others, rather than looking at how societal structures are imposed on them. As shown in the former sections, everyone operates within a society that has taken shape

through a fetishization of gender. While the couples have all internalized these norms, they also show that sometimes they resist and challenge them, creating a duality between being within and against a gendered world.

Within

As shown, all couples are located in the mesh of power of gender norms in different ways. In the interviews, I asked couples the probing question of what they would imagine their relationship would be like if gender norms would not exist. Their answers were divided fifty/fifty amongst the 18 people spoken to (table 2). As for the division amongst the couples: three couples both agreed that their 'relationship would stay the same', also three on 'relationship would change', and the last three were divided between the two. Interestingly here, the three couples that suggested it would stay the same are three cis, heterosexual couples that are mostly comfortable with gender norms. The three couples that both agree that it would be different are the three queer couples. Finally, within the remaining three couples there are mixed opinions in imagining their relationship without a world with gender norms. Interestingly here, the ones stating it would change are the women; the ones stating it would stay the same are the men. This reflects a sense of comfort with and acceptance in the current hierarchical structures in which men are most often in a high position. It shows that their identities and positions are seen as the norm to such an extent that it would persist even when gender norms would not exist.

This thought experiment shows the ability to imagine different scenarios of the people spoken to. This is important, because it reveals to what extent they realize the presence of current inequalities and injustices. The ability to imagine it differently means to recognize the extent to which it interferes in their current relationship. This recognition lays the groundwork for troubling gender.

Table 2

Answers to: 'What would your relationship look like if gender norms did not exist?'

<u>Couple's answers</u>									
Relationship would stay the same	Rowan	Margriet	Max	Paul	Lars	<u>Maeve</u>	Milan	Rosa	Rens
<u>Relationship would change</u>	Sabine	Ruby	Jay	Natalie	Femke	<u>Mika</u>	Ruben	Thijs	Tessa

Against

But awareness and recognition is not enough to create actions against gender norms. Troubling the gender dichotomy is present in all relationships, it is just that some are very aware of it and do it out of principle or have an identity that is already innately troubling gender, while others aren't fully aware of it and/or would not state it as a politically infused action but still have ways to get out from under these norms.

The experiences of Rowan's socialization are a clear example of how he and Sabine consciously choose to design their identities and relationship differently. His frustration with the normative gender dynamics in his socialization, particularly his father's dominance, led him to develop a strong aversion against machismo behaviour. His father always made decisions while he noticed the submissive response of his mother: "and my mother shrinks back or eventually gives in. (...) I always sided with my mother in discussions and found it very annoying that she didn't stand up for herself," Rowan describes. He always saw his mother doing disproportionate amounts of the household responsibilities. Ultimately his father made the (monetary) decisions: "If [my mother thought] we needed a new couch or whatever, (...) then my father thought it was nonsense. And then it didn't happen. And I would think: but my mother is the one who keeps this household running, so I also think she has something to say.

And just because she's the one who doesn't bring in the money she has no say in it. I found that nonsense. It could very well be the reason why I became a feminist. At least, I developed it more when I got to know [Sabine].”

Ruby shows how gender trouble still means they are both within and against the structures of gender norms in the world. Their gender dysphoria exemplifies awareness of the perpetuation of the gender norms they also oppose. “I often notice that I think to myself, 'I don't want to take on the kind of position typically associated with a man.' Whether I'm (...) in a conversation or in an exchange of knowledge, I don't want to assume that I know better. Often, (...) I realize I might be dominating the conversation or speaking over others. In these moments, I need to take a step back, even if it's not a big deal, because I associate that behavior strongly with masculinity. It feels somewhat dysphoric to me when I become the loudest speaker or the one explaining things to everyone. I start to wonder, 'Am I mansplaining?' But I'm not even a man.”

What became clear from the interviews was that when someone is or was confronted with injustice that had to do with gender, they tend to explicitly push away from it more. Troubling gender is done in the sphere of relationships and beyond through bigger actions, like Sabine and Rowan giving their child Sabine's last name, or through smaller actions of trouble, like Lars responding “then you shouldn't look at me” when his friend states that “strong men are needed” or Thijs and Max wearing nail polish, and Max defending his (male) colleague with nail polish. But next to these actions and in all cases, the couples spoken to shared their hopes for change when asked what they would grant the next generations. Many related their answers to freedom of expression and having the ability to explore what they like. Others related their answers to emotional progression for men: the ability to cry more often and to feel like they have space in which it is acceptable to share their feelings, to care, and to communicate openly. This shows that no one is content with gender norms regardless of how rigid or fluid they

construct their reality and togetherness. It becomes clear how the paradox of the within and against materializes and how an awareness and the will for change helps to unlearn learned dispositions.

Discussion and conclusion

Due to the chosen sampling strategy and the limited amount of time, I focused the sampling criteria for this research on the amount of years couples are together and on not solely interviewing heterosexual couples. As a result, this study lacks the intersectionality that it initially posed: there has been a lack of attention in the recruitment and interviews to the interplay of ethnicity, race, class and other intersections. Recruiting ‘happy couples’ for this study was also not a conscious choice, it is likely that couples that are happy together are more inclined to participate in a study like this. However, then it is important to note that this thesis does not reflect the experiences of those in abusive and/or violent relationships.

This research focuses on the popular notion of romantic love in the form of dyadic relationships. Of course, there are many other forms of love that can influence someone’s gendered actions. It would be interesting to research the implications of gender norms in other forms of love, such as those of family and friendship. Furthermore, I have chosen not to focus on sexual activity and non-monogamy even though the conversations sometimes highlighted it. The dyadic form of the relationships included in this research provides insight into how people navigate gender norms together.

Navigating gender norms in dyadic romantic love relationships revolves around how couples perceive and negotiate their positions and identities. The couples interviewed showed that this navigation can be difficult due to the pervasive influence of gender norms. For some, it has proven to be less difficult because they fit into the dichotomous box of gender norms. For others who do not fit, it is more challenging. Regardless, all couples experience setbacks from these norms, which they each try to oppose in their own ways. Their ‘us against the world’

mentality shows that couples face societal pressures and inequality together through the idea of unity. However, their personal identities and relationships are shaped by these gender norms, revealing a paradox of being against the gender normativity of the Western world, while also being part of it.

All couples are socialized into gender roles and expectations, which form the basis of how they navigate gender norms. Even when couples aim to create new patterns, they are influenced by their biases and ingrained assumptions from socialization. Acknowledging these conditioned norms can lead to confrontations and the need to negotiate the design of their relationship.

The couples have shown that they face pressure to adhere to gendered expectations, which serves as a reminder of the power structures of gender norms at play. What is often imposed on them is the weaponization of biological determinism and stereotypes. Often, these stereotypes are aimed at the people who are seen as women in attempts to maintain their ascribed gender roles. But when the norms align with someone's personal comfort, they have little incentive to challenge them; some people spoken to show that their existence has certain privileges, which feel like dispositions to them. The line between authenticity and socially conditioned selves has become blurry for all of the couples spoken to. But when gendered performances are weaponized as if they are biologically determined, stereotypes and gender inequality are further enforced. This is imposed on couples either externally or through their own self-discipline. Interestingly here, in some cases, gender is discussed by the couples through the lens of biological determinism while their arguments are based on the recreation of social actions, revealing a discrepancy between biological determinism and performativity.

The notion that gender norms are reproduced through performativity gives room for change. Some couples show a pressing will to challenge gender norms due to experiences of perceived injustice. This will is given shape through actions of gender trouble, both between

the two partners and outside of their relationship, such as: negotiations, collective reflection and awareness, (re)forming identities, and challenging patriarchal structures in institutions.

Thus, regardless of how rigid or fluid couples have constructed their togetherness, no one appears to be fully satisfied with the societal norms that a fetishization of gender brings. By highlighting the lived experiences of the couples spoken to, this thesis shows how societal power structures of gender are imposed on couples, and how these couples navigate them. Gender trouble can take shape through overstepping the boundaries of gender norms for the “will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own and another’s (...) growth” (Scott Peck, 2003). This means that a relationship can create space for couples to engage in collective self-identification, actions of gender trouble, and the (re)designing of their togetherness in a way that adheres less to gender norms. This creates small-scale change within, and potentially outside of, dyadic romantic love relationships.

References

- Beall, A., & Sternberg, R. J. (1995). The Social Construction of Love. *Journal Of Social And Personal Relationships*, 12(3), 417–438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407595123006>
- Bettcher, T. (2014). Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-trans/>
- Brenner, J., & Ramas, M. (1984). *Rethinking women's oppression*. New Left Review. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i144/articles/johanna-brenner-maria-ramas-rethinking-women-s-oppression.pdf>
- Butler, J. (1990). Gender trouble. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203824979>
- Campion, K. & Ingram, K. M. (2023). Far-right ‘tradwives’ see feminism as evil. their lifestyles push back against ‘the lie of equality’. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/far-right-tradwives-see-feminism-as-evil-their-lifestyles-push-back-against-the-lie-of-equality-219000>
- Cialdini, R. B., & Goldstein, N. J. (2004). Social Influence: Compliance and Conformity. *Annual Review Of Psychology*, 55(1), 591–621. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.142015>
- Collins, P.H., da Silva, E.C.G., Ergun, E. *et al.* Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory. *Contemp Polit Theory* 20, 690–725 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-021-00490-0>
- Connell, R. (1987). *Gender and power*. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL22130580M/Gender_and_power
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2022). *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE Publications.

- Diprose, G. (2017). Radical equality, care and labour in a community economy. *Gender, Place And Culture*, 24(6), 834–850. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2017.1339671>
- DuBois, L. Z., & Shattuck-Heidorn, H. (2021). Challenging the binary: Gender/sex and the bio-logics of normalcy. *American Journal Of Human Biology*, 33(5). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.23623>
- Engels, F. (1884). *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/origin_family.pdf
- Foucault, M. (1965). *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1976). *The History of Sexuality*. <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/special/endsandbeginnings/foucaultrepressiveen278.pdf>
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage.
- Hooks, B. (2000). *All About Love: New Visions*. William Morrow.
- Illouz, E. (1997). Consuming the Romantic Utopia. In *University of California Press eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520917996>
- Johnson, P. J. (2007). *Love, Heterosexuality and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203015865>
- Knott, E., Rao, A. H., Summers, K., & Teeger, C. (2022). Interviews in the social sciences. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43586-022-00150-6>
- Lawlor, L., & Nale, J. (2014). Multiplicity. In *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon* (pp. 304–307). Cambridge University Press eBooks. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139022309.054>
- Lorber, J. (1994). The social construction of gender. In *Paradoxes of Gender*. Yale University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1bhkntg>

- Lorber, J. (2001). *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*. Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Lowry, R., Johns, M. M., Gordon, A. R., Austin, S. B., Robin, L., & Kann, L. (2018). Nonconforming Gender Expression and Associated Mental Distress and Substance Use Among High School Students. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 172(11), 1020.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2018.2140>
- Morgenroth, T., & Ryan, M. K. (2018). Gender Trouble in Social Psychology: How Can Butler's Work Inform Experimental Social Psychologists' Conceptualization of Gender? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01320>
- Nadler, J., & Lowery, M. (2018). Chapter 3. Modern gender roles and stereotypes: the cultural funneling of individuals toward gendered choices. In *The War on Women in the United States: Beliefs, Tactics, and the Best Defenses*. Praeger.
- NPO 3. (2023, 29 december). Deze vrouwen willen terug naar het aanrecht | MEIDEN VAN TRADITIE #1 | NPO 3 [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CmX6U5C4r0>
- Peck, M. S. (2003). *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth*. Touchstone
- Poole, M. S., & Billingsley, J. (1989). The Structuring of Dyadic Decisions. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 216–248). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4612-3516-3_9
- Potter, G. (2010). Power and Knowledge. *Journal Of Critical Realism*, 9(2), 133–154.
<https://doi.org/10.1558/jcr.v9i2.133>
- Simmel, G. (1896). Superiority and Subordination as Subject-Matter of Sociology. *American Journal Of Sociology*, 2(2), 167–189. <https://doi.org/10.1086/210600>
- Simmel, G. (1908). The Dyad and the Triad. In *Classical sociological theory*. Wiley-Blackwell.

- Sunstein, C. R. (1996). Social norms and social roles. In *Columbia Law Review*.
<https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/clr96&id=913&collection=journals&index=>
- Sultana, A. (2012). Patriarchy and Women's Subordination: A Theoretical Analysis. *The Arts Faculty Journal*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3329/afj.v4i0.12929>
- Swidler, A. (2001). *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. The University of Chicago Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/420661>
- Turkel, G. (1990). Michel Foucault: Law, Power, and Knowledge. *Journal Of Law And Society*, 17(2), 170. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1410084>
- Vigh, H. (2009). Motion squared: A second look at the concept of social navigation. *Anthropological Theory*, 9(4), 419-438. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499609356044>
- Vogel, L. (2013). *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. Historical Materialism.
- Walby, S. (1991). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Wiley & Sons.
https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21680/1/1990_Walby_Theorising_Patriarchy_book_Blackwell.pdf
- Witt, M. G., & Wood, W. (2010). Self-regulation of Gendered Behavior in Everyday Life. *Sex Roles*, 62(9–10), 635–646. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9761-y>
- Wood, W., & Eagly, A. H. (2009). Gender Identity. In *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior*. The Guilford Press.
- Zentner, M., & Von Aufsess, C. (2020). Is being gender nonconforming distressing? It depends where you live: gender equality across 15 nations predicts how much gender nonconformity is related to self-esteem. *Psychological Medicine*, 52(10), 1857–1865.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291720003645>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Operationalization table

Concepts	Definitions	Dimensions	Indicators
Dyadic romantic love relationships	“Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth” (Scott Peck, 2003). The notion of love is a construct with many dimensions which form people's actions, feelings and thoughts (Beall & Sternberg, 1995). A dyad is a social structure of two which depends on each other for existence and is situated in broader societal structures (Poole & Billingsley, 1989; Simmel, 1908)	1. Characteristics	2. Duration, description, day rhythm, prides, points of improvement
Power structures of gender	Power structures shape people's thoughts, identity, actions and interactions, and vary through time and culture. The disciplining of gender is used to regulate and control people by giving them certain attributes and roles for behaviour according to their sex (Foucault, 1976). Power dynamics are on the basis of reciprocal interactions (Simmel, 1896).	1. Viewpoint division of labour 2. Socialization 3. Weaponization of gender	1. Current division of labour, expectations, ideals 2. Upbringing, parents' performance of gender norms 3. Experiencing stereotypes, pressure of adhering to expectations
Gender trouble	Gender is constructed through repetition of performance and can thus be deconstructed. Gender trouble disrupts the binary understanding of sex and gender by challenging societal norms and expectations through action	1. Deviating from gender norms 2. Negotiations	1. Active non-conformations, anecdotes, awareness 2. Reactions, pushbacks, valuing change

	and conversation (Butler, 1990)		
--	---------------------------------	--	--

N.B. This table forms the beginning of the interviewing process in the context of dyadic romantic love relationships. Recurring themes and topics in interviews that are not taken into account in this table will be included in the analysis and discussion.

Appendix 2: Consent form

**Erasmus
University
Rotterdam**



Dear participants,

As part of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) Sociology master's thesis, I am conducting a study that requires the collection of personal data. It is necessary for me to ensure that your rights and privacy are protected throughout this process. Therefore, I am reaching out to you to provide information regarding your participation and the handling of your data. Your participation in this study is based on your full consent.

The data collected will be used for the purposes of the research project, which aims to look at gender norms in love relationships. By signing and participating in this study, the respondents give permission to provide information on their love relationships, to have this information processed and if applicable (when the grade surpasses an 8) published in the database of the EUR. The data collected during this interview will be made anonymous by using fictionalized names. The interview will be recorded.

Access to data and storage

Only designated individuals, such as myself and my supervisor, will have access to the collected data. Any third parties, like transcription programs, are bound to confidential agreements. I will keep the data for approximately 12 months. After this period, the data will be securely disposed of in accordance with GDPR regulations. In the situation of publishment of the thesis, data will be stored

Participant rights

- As a participant, you have the following rights regarding your data: access to your data, Rectification, erasure, or restriction of processing of your personal data, withdrawal of consent at any time.
- If the data collected include special categories of data (e.g., racial or ethnic origin, health information), you will be asked to state it to your own liking and give explicit consent.
- All information provided to you will be transparent and presented in a clear way.

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation or the handling of your data, please do not hesitate to contact me (641327et@eur.nl or 06 21337385). If there are any other concerns on the processing of data that are not resolved after communication, you are always free to contact the EUR data protection officer (privacy@eur.nl)

Thank you for considering participating in this study.

Please fill in and sign on the next page:



Participant 1

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Participant 2

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Researcher

Eline Teunissen

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 3. CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title:

Name, email of student: Eline Teunissen, 641327et@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Willem Schinkel, schinkel@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: 22.01/2024, six months

Is the research study conducted within DPAS

YES - NO

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?
(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. **YES - ~~NO~~**

If 'NO': skip to part V.

If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? **~~YES~~ - NO**

Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act ([WMO](#)) must first be submitted to [an accredited medical research ethics committee](#) or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects ([CCMO](#)).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. **YES - ~~NO~~**

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). **YES - NO**

If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? YES - NO
2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? YES - NO
3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? YES - NO
4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? YES - NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).
5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? YES - NO
6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? YES - NO
7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? YES - NO
8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? YES - NO
9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? YES - NO
10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? YES - NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Theory, in depth double interviews

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

9 couples, 18 people

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

N.a.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

On a laptop, google drive, files

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

The researcher

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Right after each interview.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

There will be a usage of codes: 'participant 1' or 'couple 1' or a pseudonym/fictionalized name.

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student:

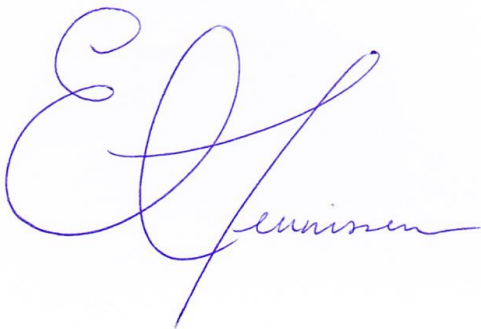
Eline Annelisa Teunissen

Name (EUR) supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Willem Schinkel

Date: 22-06-2024

Date:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Eline Teunissen', is written over a light blue rectangular background.