Gender Inequality: New Conceptual Terrain
Sarah Fenstermaker, Candace West, and Don H. Zimmerman (1991)
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Hypothesis
- Understanding gender as an "interactional accomplishment" sheds light on the mechanisms behind gender inequality. Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman use this reconceptualization to explain inequalities in the household and workplace and explain the links between them.
- Individuals and institutions are motivated to "accomplish gender" because they are held "gender accountable".
- Gender becomes a "bridge" between different realms of human activity.

Problem of **reducing "gender" to "sex"**
- "The Lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the concept of gender as distinct from sex results in a failure to precisely articulate the relationship between forms of inequality as they are experienced and to adequately anticipate change in them." (25) Reducing "gender" to "sex" doesn't explain how these inequalities came about through societal mechanisms and hierarchies.

Problems of understanding gender as a **"role"**
- Definition of role: "Traditionally, the notion of role has constituted a largely normative orientation that determined the ideal expectations and actions associated with those in various social locations." (27)
- "One problem with this view is that no concept of role can specify such actions *a priori.* The potential omnirelevance of gender in human affairs means that when paired with the concept of role, the result is like 'the happy drunk'. […] 'The more it tries to take in, the more incoherent it becomes.'" (27) In other words, the authors hold that role theory is not a useful analytical tool for an omnirelevant concept like gender. Our group assumes they are trying to say that since gender affects all aspects of life the theory would become too detailed and incoherent.
- A second problem seems to be that social scientists working with gender as a "role" have not been able to analyze "the conditions which create and maintain gender differences and attitudes" and their relation to paid and unpaid work. (27)

Problem of understanding gender as **"status"**
- "The implicit presumption in such work is that one's gender could be *overcome* interactionally, eventually prove no longer noteworthy, nor require accommodation. And with that, the 'real' business of the interaction might resume its central position." (28) Fenstermaker, West and Zimmerman argue that gender permeates all social life — there is no interaction without gender since everything can be judged on account of one's gender — and can therefore not be overcome.

Gender as **situated accomplishment**
- "Gender is not simply something one 'is', but rather […] something one does in interaction with others." (29)
- "We contend that gender is an accomplishment — 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions, attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category' (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 127)." (29)
- Accomplishment according to Merriam-Webster: something done, achieved, or accomplished successfully; a special skill or ability gained by practice or training.
- "The key to our formulation of gender as an accomplishment is the notion of accountability; that is, the possibility of describing activities, states of affairs, and descriptions themselves in serious and consequential ways — for example, as 'manly' or 'womanly' behaviours." (29)
- "Insofar as societal members know that their conduct is accountable, they will frame their actions in relation to how they might be construed by others in the contexts in which they occur. And insofar as sex category is omnirelevant to social life (Garfinkel 1967), it serves as an ever-available resource for the design and interpretation of social conduct." (29)

Implications of understanding gender as an accomplishment
1. "Not only individuals but also institutions are accountable to normative conceptions of gender." (30)
    1. Text only provides one example: "Advertisements [...] cast the work of the airlines as the expression of essential femininity. Thus, not only the flight attendant but the airline, too, presents itself and can be assessed in relation to gender." (30)
    2. No clear explanation of how institutions are gender accountable.
2. "The salience of gender cannot be determined apart from the context in which it is 'done'. [...] Any social situation can be *made* to suffice for the accomplishment of gender and it is in that making that gender is granted its salience in human conduct." (31)
3. "The doing of gender does not require heterosexual groups. [...] The most exaggerated expressions of womanly and manly behaviors may be as readily observed in settings inhabited by members of a single sex category (e.g. Army boot camp, fraternity initiations) as they are in heterosocial contexts." (31)
4. "Doing gender is so fundamental to our ways of being and behaving in the company of others that it ought not to be conceptualized as an intrusion or intervention in interaction." (31)
5. "In some situations, the accomplishment of gender may be the primary work that is being done." Example: "Selective pairing among heterosexual couples guarantees that boys and men will be clearly bigger, stronger and older than the girls and women with whom they are paired." (32)

How does the perception of gender as an accomplishment enhance the analysis of **gender inequalities at home and work**?
- As female labor force participation started to increase in the late 1940s and early 1950s, researchers and the broader public expected that social change would lead men to take over more work in the household. But it didn't.
- Gender at **work:** "Regardless of (employment) position, the *practice* of gender and its complex relation to the practice of work will support inequality on the job." (34) However, the quotes they use to support this statement just provide examples of outcomes of gender inequality in the workplace. It remains unclear how the societal system that causes these inequalities actually works.
- Gender at **home:** "We argue that the relatively uniform and lopsided patterns of household labor apportionment, while appearing irrational and unfair, nevertheless are elected by most households." (36) By dividing household work unequally, one of the main effects of domestic work is the production of gender and reproduction of gender inequality.
- Bridge: Doing work and doing gender "are similar enough to conclude that the structural intersection of inequality as it is experienced in the family and in the economy is made possible by the mechanism of gender's interactional achievement." (36) How inequalities at home are linked to inequalities at the workplace is still not clear.

Potential avenues of **research**
- "If we are to entertain the vision that one day inequality based on sex will be substantially overcome, we will need to understand the mechanisms by which it is sustained in institutional social arrangements." (38)
- "Finding the means to social change rests on a fuller understanding of how inequality is rooted in gender and understood as an accomplishment and how interaction facilitates that accomplishment". (38)

Final comments
- The text aims to show that former sociological theories missed to show the mechanisms by which gender inequality at home and at work are maintained and how they intersect. However, the authors fail to explain how they intersect and only say that such inequality is similar in both places.
- Their new approach to gender as an accomplishment — or even "doing gender" in general — underlines that inequalities are produced by the active process of doing gender. By underlining that gender is not a passive attribute, the authors imply that we are responsible for how we do gender and therefore for the inequalities produced and reproduced by our actions. However the authors do not expand on this important implication.
- "Deep-seated, authentic social change will require a profoundly different organization of interactional practices around gender in *everyday* affairs." (37)