Toward a Dialectical Model of Family Gender Discourse: Body, Identity, and Sexuality

The goal of this article is to propose a dialectical model representing gender discourse in families. A brief review of literature in sociology, psychology, and gender studies focuses on three dialectical issues: nature versus culture, similarity versus difference, and stability versus fluidity. Deconstructing gender theories from a postmodern feminist perspective, the authors discuss agency and context in families’ gender discourse. Narrative excerpts from interviews with an adolescent daughter and her mother illustrate three emergent themes in the social construction of gender: body, identity, and sexuality. The article concludes with recommendations for family researchers.

Over the past decade, family scholars increasingly have used social constructionist approaches to studying gender (Fox & Murray, 2000). From a social constructionist perspective, cultural discourse, or the institutional and social practices through which our experience of gender is organized, is seen as constituting gender (Leaper, 2000). In this article, as in most gender scholarship since the 1970s (Connell, 1999), the term sex is used to refer to physical differentiation (i.e., male-female) whereas the term gender is used to refer to a social construction (i.e., masculine-feminine).

Public discourse on gender is recognizable both in formal teachings and in informal messages from folk stories, conversations with friends, and communications media. At the same time, as individual family members interact with each other, they coconstruct their own family-level gender discourse. In fact, the everyday practices of families—feeding, bathing, dressing, and clothing—communicate to infants, children, and adolescents a set of meanings about appropriate gender behavior in a particular family. Often, but not always, parents’ and children’s gendered behaviors are sex typed, or consistent with stereotypes about their biological sex, such as when parents of infants talk more to girls than to boys. As a feminist project, this article is part of a public discourse of gender. We view the dominant discourse of gender stereotyping as restrictive and problematic both for individuals and for families.

The purpose of this article is to propose a dialectical model representing gender discourse in families. To accomplish this goal, we first briefly review social constructionist approaches to studying gender and identify three dialectical issues: nature versus culture, similarity versus difference, and stability versus fluidity. Next, we adopt a postmodern feminist perspective to deconstruct gender by focusing on agency and identity and on

Department of Psychology and Women’s Studies Program, University of Detroit Mercy, 8200 West Outer Drive, Detroit, MI 48219–0900 (blumelb@udmercy.edu).

*Department of Counseling, Oakland University.

Key Words: dialectics, feminist theories, gender discourse, narrative, postmodern families.
contextualism in families’ gender discourse. Three emergent themes in the social construction of gender—body, identity, and sexuality—are illustrated with narrative excerpts from interviews with an adolescent daughter and her mother. We conclude by examining ways in which dialectical issues constitute the process of gender discourse in families.

The Social Construction of Gender in Postmodern Families

Many scholars have suggested that the strongest influence on children’s gender occurs within families when parents communicate their beliefs—sometimes unconsciously—about sex and gender (Eccles, 1993; Leaper, 2000; Maccoby, 1998). Researchers have demonstrated that family interactions often reveal implicit gender ideologies, scripts, or rituals that enable family members to coconstruct shared understandings of the dominant gender discourse in society (Bem, 1993; Coltrane, 1998). Parents typically scaffold the child’s gradual understanding of the world as gendered, either confirming or rejecting the dominant gender discourse (Coltrane & Adams, 1997). In this process of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1994), both children and parents contribute to a family’s unique interpretation of sex-typed gender stereotypes, known as gender schemas. Children raised in families where less gender stereotyping occurs are expected to develop weaker gender schemas (Bem, 2001). Egalitarian parenting may diminish the intergenerational transmission of sex-typed gender stereotypes and the reproduction of a gendered society (Cahill, 1986, 1989; Coltrane & Adams). In the extreme, families who do not conform to gender stereotypes have been variously termed nongendered, ungendered, transgendered, degendered, or postgendered (see Kimmell, 2000). For example, Risman (1998) found that postgendered families deconstructed sex-typed stereotypes, modeled egalitarian roles, and engaged in a gender-fair division of household labor. In addition, when children who were raised in such households encountered inconsistencies in gender meanings in social contexts outside their homes, they were more likely to recognize these contradictory messages than were children from sex-typed households (Risman; Risman & Johnson-Sumberford, 1998; Risman & Myers, 1997).

According to Huston and Alvarez (1990), families can contribute to an understanding of gender and, at the same time, can encourage divergence from social stereotypes. For example, in a study of unconventional families, Weisner and Wilson-Mitchell (1990) found that children of parents who had strong countercultural beliefs raised children who were more often non-sex-typed than those of parents with more conventional beliefs. These children were able to think about cultural situations involving gender—and cultural norms more generally—in a more critical, “disputable” way and then were prepared to use an alternative non-sex-typed schema (Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell). Similarly, Eccles and Bryant (1994) found that the transcendence of gender stereotypes was fostered by reducing the importance of biological sex as a defining property of one’s gender identity (Eccles & Bryant; Rebecca, Hefner, & Oleshan-sky, 1976).

Postgendered family members seem to share constructions of flexibility, personal choice, and the development of new and emergent possibilities as they reject a binary system of sex and gender (Rebecca et al., 1976; Risman, 1998; Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). In this ongoing struggle against the dominant gender discourse, however, individuals in families are surrounded by multiple, incompatible social and cultural messages as they attempt to negotiate a new family-level reconstruction of gender. This process of reconstructing gender engages family members in encounters with contradictions and opposing viewpoints, processes that may be described effectively in dialectical terms. Dialectical scholarship is focused on concepts of contradiction and change (Baxter & Montgomery, 1998). A dialectics of gender would describe multiple, transitory identifications with a multivocal cultural discourse as family members continually resist and renegotiate gender constructions in the postmodern world (Allen & Baier, 1992).

Postmodern family theorists in three disciplinary traditions—sociology, psychology, and gender studies—are among contemporary scholars who have moved away from a traditional focus on dualistic models of sex and gender (e.g., male vs. female, masculine vs. feminine). There has been little integration of sociological theory of the body with psychological theory of gender identity, however (cf., Connell, 1999). And although feminist scholars have recently addressed the epistemology of gender as embodied knowledge (i.e., understood through the materiality of bodies), most have omitted a within-families perspective from their theoretical formulations, focusing in-
stead on the broader social or cultural discourse (e.g., Grosz, 1994). This lack of conceptual integration leaves gender theorists and researchers with the related problems of (a) how to approach gender as a relational rather than personal variable, and (b) how to situate the coconstruction of gender in a family context.

**Deconstructing Theories of Gender**

To address these problems, we first examine how each discipline has focused researchers’ attention on a different dialectical question concerning the tension between traditionally dualistic positions:

- Are sex and gender better explained by nature or by culture?
- Are the sexes more similar or more different?
- Are sex and gender distinctions more often stable or more often fluid?

**Sociological Perspectives: Nature or Culture?**

Sociologists theorizing gender have suggested that culture and society are more powerful explanatory mechanisms than nature and biology (see Shilling, 1993; Synnott, 1993). Many traditional sociologists, however, have subscribed implicitly to a model in which the binary categories of male-female and of normal-deviant are assumed to be natural dichotomies upon which most societies are based (Lorber, 1996). Many assumptions of gender socialization research (e.g., the categories of male vs. female and adult vs. child) or research on marriage and work (e.g., private vs. public domains) reflect the philosophical dualism that pervades mainstream sociology (Morgan, 1996).

Feminist sociologists have critiqued such dualistic notions of socially constructed categories (Connell, 1999; Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 1999). For example, Thorne (1994, 1997) conducted an ethnographic study in which school-age children manifested dichotomous gender displays, such as a masculine hair style or a feminine style of clothing. At the same time, apparently because early pubertal maturation held greater social prestige for boys than for girls, a cultural pattern of male dominance was reproduced in the peer group. Thorne (1997) concluded that gender was not questioned by the school children who displayed sex-typed differences in appearance. Hausman (2000) has asserted that such ontological perspectives justifi gender as innate, although more epistemological approaches explain gender as a social construct.

A similar ontological error is often made by parents who treat daughters differently from sons beginning the moment that they are told (sometimes before a child is born), “It’s a girl!”

**Psychological Perspectives: Similarity or Difference?**

Within psychology, gender debates are more likely to address the question of whether the sexes are more similar or different. Sex differences have been an often-recurring theme in American psychology, which is generally characterized by essentialist explanations of gender and individualistic understandings of self (Bohan, 2002). For example, developmental psychologists have established predictable sequences of children’s understanding of self, beginning with sex-related categorizations (i.e., male-female), moving to knowledge of sex-typed behaviors of self and others (i.e., masculine-feminine), and then to the presumed realization that sex is stable or constant (i.e., boys become men and girls become women) (Bigler, 1997; Martin, 1993; Signorella, Bigler, & Liben, 1993).

In traditional studies of sex typing, many developmental and social psychologists have assumed that sex differences exist (e.g., Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). More recently, however, scholars have expressed the view that the modest effects reported in the literature were due to gender differentiation in varied social contexts (Maccoby, 1998). For example, Eccles (1993) found that parents’ gender stereotypes, in interaction with a child’s sex, mediated how parents thought about their child’s performance of sex-typed activities. Parents formed an impression of their child’s abilities and interests that depended on the child’s biological sex to a greater extent than was justified by their actual performance, and this impression subsequently influenced the types of experiences that parents provided (Eccles). Thus, the differential experiences provided to boys and girls resulted in a pattern of sex differences in actual skills that was consistent with gender stereotypes (Eccles & Bryant, 1994). In psychology, the concept of alpha bias has been used to describe exaggerated differences between men and women, whereas beta bias has been used to describe conclusions in which actual differences between the sexes are overlooked (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1994; see also Baber & Allen, 1992).
**Gender Studies Perspectives: Stability or Fluidity?**

Feminist scholars (e.g., Bohan, 2002; Epstein, 1997; Leaper, 2000), in turn, have focused on the question of whether dichotomous sex-typed gender distinctions reinforce biological essentialism and therefore sustain gender inequities. Feminist researchers increasingly argue that two categories are not adequate to describe variations in sex and gender experienced by individuals across their lives. Biologist Fausto-Sterling (1993), for example, on the basis of studies of infants whose ambiguous genitalia were surgically altered at birth to conform to a binary sex/gender system, claimed that gender variation is normal and suggested that there are actually five sexes: males; females; herms (i.e., true hermaphrodites, or persons with both an ovary and a testis); merms (i.e., male pseudohermaphrodites, who are born with testes and some aspect of female genitalia); and ferms (i.e., female pseudohermaphrodites, who have ovaries combined with some aspect of male genitalia). Although it might seem natural to regard intersexuals and transgendered people as in-between the categories of male and female, Fausto-Sterling (2000) suggested that both male and female and masculine and feminine are best conceptualized as points along a continuum.

This radical theoretical approach to deconstructing gender furthers the poststructural feminist goal of transcending dichotomous sex and gender categories (Baber & Allen, 1992; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Walker, 1999; Weedon, 1999).

This approach is informed by the assertion of postmodern philosophers that the body is not sexed in any way before its determination within a sociopolitical discourse (Foucault, 1978; see also Connell, 1999). Foucault, who called attention to the cultural and social institutions that sustain hegemony through what he termed the deployment of sexuality, suggested that the body gains meaning only through the discourse of power—primarily through husband-wife and parent-child interactions (Foucault). In Foucault’s historical analysis, European families were the political institution that regulated births, controlled women and children, and specified sexual norms (e.g., the incest taboo), thus creating both the social discourse on gender and the stability of gender identities.

In a feminist revision of Foucault’s theory intended to “trouble” gender categories, Butler (1990) replaced the idea of a stable identity with the notion of constitutive instability. She implied that inconsistent cultural discourse produces gender effects. Gender effects produce a range of multiple, different kinds of identifications with masculinity and femininity (Deutscher, 1997). For example, the category of bisexual challenges the binary discourse of the dominant sex/gender system that requires subjects to locate themselves as either gay or straight (Ault, 1996). Thus, in rejecting an assumption of self-constancy, postmodern feminists suggest that gender is performative, that gender reality is created through sustained social performances and repeated cultural discourse (Butler, 1993).

**Deconstructing Agency and Identity**

The three perspectives described above differ in their assumptions about an individual’s ability to act independently of others’ influence. Butler (1990) contrasted psychological perspectives that emphasize individual choice (agency) with sociological perspectives that emphasize the continuity of social expectations (identity). Alternatively, poststructural feminists have proposed that the regulatory practices of society influence a person’s identity through ongoing social discourse in which an agentic subject is an active participant (Butler, 1993). An often-cited example of this regulatory function of social discourse is the boy who was called a girl because he wore barrettes to preschool:

> After repeatedly insisting that “Wearing barrettes doesn’t matter, I have a penis and testicles,” Jeremy finally pulled down his pants to make the point more convincingly. The other boy was not impressed. He simply said, “Everybody has a penis; only girls wear barrettes!” (Bem, 1997, p. 109)

In this example of gender discourse, an agentic child (James, 2000) actively created the child as an “othered” category by constructing categories of difference based on cultural stereotypes (cf. Prout, 2000).

A simple model of this discursive process represents individuals as “actors” who perform everyday interactions based on the gender “scripts” of their culture, social class, or family (Goffman, 1959; Levy & Fivush, 1993). A common childhood example of this type of stereotyped cultural discourse is revealed in classic fairy tales (see Orner, 1996). Virtually all the archetypal fairy tales about boys involve the enactment of agency (e.g.,
solving a problem, finding a lost object, slaying the dragon), whereas traditional stories about girls almost always involve the renunciation of agency (e.g., being saved by the prince, being denied passage to adulthood,submitting to marriage) (Ortner). As parents,children, and other family members apprehend such seemingly innocuous examples of the dominant gender discourse, they may repeat, revise, or reject these cultural messages, either individually or collectively.

Social constructionist theory allows for agency in the face of cultural messages. The processes of deconstructing and reconstructing make-believe gender narratives should both be equally effective in decreasing the type of thinking that conceals the operation of male hegemony as an organizing institution, sometimes called the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham, 1996). Imagination and fantasy may provide an alternative both to Cooley’s looking-glass self—reflecting how you think others see you—and to Lacan’s specular image—which reflects only what you want to see (Ingraham, 1996; see also Weiss, 1999). For example, such identity feedback is central in the experience of adolescents, when youth normatively manifest the cognitive egocentrism of an imaginary audience (“Everyone is looking at me!”) and a personal fable (“I’m unique!”) (Elkind, 1967). Thus, adolescents in particular may be influenced more by their own and their peers’ agentic body experiments (e.g., piercing, tattooing, hair dyeing, or cross-dressing) than by heteronormative images in the popular culture (Fallon, 1990). Doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) is a central assumption in our feminist project of conceptualizing family gender discourse as a performative practice through which gender is subject to continuous renegotiation (cf. Moloney & Fenstermaker, 2002).

Deconstructing Family Contexts

The three perspectives also provide different ways of understanding family influence in the creation and transmission of gender. Social constructionists assert that every family evolves a set of shared assumptions that serve to organize both their family-level discourse and their experience of the larger cultural discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Reiss, 1981). Although the embodying of gender norms in some families may not be carried out according to societal expectations, parents often assist their children in (re)enacting the dominant social discourse in contexts outside the home. For example, in a study of male-to-female transsexuals, Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) found that although individuals’ recognition of themselves as transgendered began in childhood, even the most understanding parents demanded conformity when children started school. In this example, families attempted to ensure that their children interpreted and enacted gender norms according to the prevailing social discourse.

Feminist cultural critics consider the practice by which gendering occurs to be compulsory when it involves pressure to conform to gender norms (Rich, 1980). For example, a young woman described the difficulty of resisting gender norms by rejecting heteronormative standards:

I don’t shave my body hair. . . . And that brings a lot of people in contact with their homophobia, people who find me an attractive woman and then see my legs, because it’s easy to imagine that these are the legs of a boy and that takes some getting used to, especially for boys who don’t think of themselves as attracted to male-looking legs. (Bem, 1997, p. 196)

In the above example, this late adolescent’s construction of gender involved the recognition that the perfect image she is looking for in the mirror is often based on feminine gender stereotypes. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), if we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously reproduce and legitimate patriarchal hegemonic standards that are based on sex category.

From a contextual perspective, feminists claim that gender norms cannot be changed only at the institutional and cultural levels but also must be addressed at the interactional level (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In the family context, the question that adolescents implicitly ask parents is often, “Who will you let me become?” Postmodern adolescents often question the viability of gender categories themselves, believing in the importance of going beyond alpha or beta bias toward the goal of a nongendered society (Debold, 2001). When families reject hierarchical thinking about gender, they provide an important site of resistance to the dominant social discourse (Hill Collins, 1998). Robust research findings indicate that when families encourage self-assertion, permit disagreement, and respect others’ views, adolescent identity exploration is greater than in families where individuality is not encouraged (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985; Steinmetz, 1999).

Nevertheless, gender theorists have relatively ignored families as sites for doing gender (Messer, 2000; see also Kimmell, 2000). Ongoing re-
constructions must occur in a family’s pattern of interaction not only to accommodate an adolescent’s cognitive development but also to respond to parent-child negotiation of identities as different gender performances are practiced (Blume & Blume, 1997). In contrast with widespread views of adolescent gender explorations as negative, the following dialectical model proposes that families view gender-bending behavior as a nonverbal deconstruction of gender schemas supported by a postmodern youth culture.

A DIALECTICAL MODEL OF FAMILY GENDER CONSTRUCTION

A dialectic, according to Riegel (1976), reveals underlying tensions, apparent ambiguities, and contextual choices that cannot be reduced to dualities because of the indeterminacy and instability of intersections. A dialectical analysis examines multiple data sources to investigate the handling of such tensions over time, focusing less on particular resolutions that result at any one time and more on the exchanges through which assumptions, meanings, and practices challenge each other (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998).

In the remainder of this article, one case from an ongoing qualitative study of adolescents’ and their parents’ family stories is described to illustrate through narratives about gender the three dialectical issues described earlier (i.e., nature vs. culture, similarity vs. difference, fluidity vs. stability). The following examples were taken from two separate interviews, one with a 17-year-old female adolescent and another with her mother. Participants were White, middle-class residents of a major metropolitan city. Excerpts illustrate (a) an adolescent girl’s narratives of repeated encounters with the dominant gender discourse and (b) her mother’s contributions to an ongoing family dialectical process of living with gender-related tensions. We used a series of open-ended narrative prompts to elicit childhood stories that were tape recorded and later transcribed (Reissman, 1993). Excerpts were identified through an analytic approach based on theoretical sampling (Straus & Corbin, 1998). As suggested by Strauss and Corbin, data were axially coded according to concepts from the evolving theory of family gender construction in order to maximize the discovery of relationships and variations among emergent gender themes. Following Conville (1998), transitory relationship adjustments were linked to dialectical tensions by organizing respondents’ separate narratives into an integrated timeline.

Body Themes

Body-image issues emerged in responses to questions about development of physical abilities, maturation, and experimentation in physical appearance through dress, hair, or body adornment. In the following examples of narratives about the body, transitory resolutions favor the dominance of culture over nature.

Mother and daughter both recalled that the daughter’s involvement in team sports dominated her childhood. The daughter recalled, “I was one of the only girls on the baseball team.” As described by the mother, “She played soccer as a youngster. Softball, umm . . . but mostly it was baseball. . . . Her dad said, umm, do you want to play baseball? . . . and she loved that.” According to her mother, however, “it’s basically marching band that consumes her time now.”

Friends and family both supported experimenting with activities and self-presentation. Each of the respondents also recalled significant changes in the daughter’s style of dress, with the different phases seeming to demonstrate a balance between the agentic child and various social influences. The mother said, “When she was a child, she loved to wear pink. And she liked to wear dresses . . . And then she became pretty conservative, where she would wear pants most of the time, which was fine.” The daughter’s story picks up later:

I saw, like, a video of me and my friends in fourth grade. We all had these black leggings on and these big white tee shirts . . . . But still back then I still had, like, I wore some girlish clothes. Like, I wore dresses and skirts and all that back then. But I loved wearing jeans and being, like, I would wanna play in my skirts too . . . .

The 17-year-old and her mother also described an ongoing tension around hair style. Mother said,

. . . it was dyed, highlighted, and dyed pink for spring and summer. But I made her dye it back for her senior pictures, but she’s getting it dyed back to pink after the senior pictures are done. With one picture, formal picture, taken with the pink in her hair.

As the daughter explains it, “So my mother made my brother promise to have normal hair, so I had to have normal hair. Except this one allowance.”
Identity Themes

Gender identity themes emerged in response to interview questions about childhood activities and preferences. When asked what she liked to do as a child, this 17-year-old stated,

I was a tomboy. I always played with my brother, like, we’d play tackle football sometimes with him and his other friends. . . . I always had real short hair. I can’t stand having long hair. So I would always hang out with my brother and his friends before, like, I was mainly around guys. I had one girl friend and then we still weren’t even that girly always getting in the dirt and just playing.

Her mother similarly recalled,

. . . she didn’t do the traditional. . . . I remember once she got a Barbie doll when she was in second grade. She got two Barbie dolls at a birthday party. And she said, “What am I supposed to do with these?”

Both the mother’s and the daughter’s identity narratives included multiple accounts of viewing girls’ and boys’ interests and activities as more similar than different.

Sexuality Themes

Lastly, both mother and daughter were asked about the adolescent’s close relationships. When asked about dating and sexual intimacy, the daughter said,

Like, I have my first boyfriend now, like, it’s my first boyfriend, and the thing is we’ve never really had a date. Like, we just hang out. I prefer that so much more, like, more casual, like, we hang out, we always go out with my friends, or sometimes just us two, but just a mix.

Her mother was equally contradictory:

Well, for the longest time, she didn’t formally date, but she did hang out with, um, a group of friends, and she just started a relationship with a young man who graduated this year. And now it’s one on one, they’re . . . it’s almost like a threesome now because she has a really good friend who hooked them up together. And, um, but she’s still, um, I guess would group date . . . group dating. But she’s also going with this one boy, so . . .

Both the mother and the daughter described this emerging relationship as more fluid over time than stable, but their attempts to describe the relationship demonstrated a tension between their valuing of fluidity and the social demands related to traditional, heterosexual dating norms.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that through lived experiences, themes in the cultural discourse of gender (e.g., body, identity, and sexuality) may emerge in family narratives. Dialectical tensions surrounding family members’ interpersonal negotiation of contradictions in the gender discourse also were revealed in their narratives: “we always go out with my friends,” which is contradicted in the same utterance by “just us two.” To the extent that narratives told by different family members are similar, as in the case presented, we can infer that they represent family-level gender discourse. If the narratives of family members were nonshared, however, we could have inferred an unIntegrated individual-level deconstruction of family gender discourse (e.g., a female adolescent who works on cars despite her family’s heteronormativity). And, lastly, when shared family narratives diverge from the dominant cultural discourse, we might infer a family-level reconstruction of the social discourse on gender (e.g., a male ballet student who is encouraged to dance by his family). These social constructions of gender may involve multiple transitory points along dialectical dimensions depending on temporal or situational contexts. As stated by Chafetz (1999), people constantly recreate their own and their interaction partners’ sense of gender as they interact.

Rather than reproducing the social constructions that may inadvertently limit possibilities and constrain choices, our goal in this feminist project has been to envision a model that can be used by family scholars to interrogate the power dynamics of gender discourse and transcend the dualities of gender categories themselves (see HeKman, 1990). To this end, we have graphically modeled the dialectics of family gender construction by using intersecting dimensions to represent the organizing dialectics described in this paper: nature versus culture, similarity versus difference, and stability versus fluidity. Figure 1 illustrates a dialectical solution to constructing gender by the family whose narratives were presented above. As expressed in their family stories, both mother and daughter shared a family-level gender discourse of cultural influences on physical appearance, similarity of boys’ and girls’ abilities and interests, and the fluidity of intimate relationships. Although each dialectical problem in the case presented illustrated a separate content theme, it would be theoretically
possible for each content area—body, identity, and sexuality—to illustrate the same dialectic. For example, a given family may construct beliefs about the body, identity, and sexuality with the dialectical solution of “more similar than different.” In such a case, boys and girls would dress alike, perform the same household chores, and be egalitarian in relationships.

Future research must examine not only the interactions among body, identity, and sexuality but also their intersections with class, race, nationality, ethnicity, disability, religion, or sexual orientation to see whether the model accurately represents diverse families’ struggles against the dominant gender discourse (Schippers, 2000). Such a theoretical model should describe equally well a family with two lesbian mothers, a family composed of a gay father and his adopted child, and a family headed by a heterosexual couple. According to Malone (2001), to dispute gendered practices, we must deconstruct the social contexts in which gender is signified as natural, including the family context. Instead, body, identity, and sexuality should be seen as interactively constituted as family members coconstruct and negotiate dialectical positions.

SUMMARY
The dialectical model described in this paper was used to deconstruct the intersecting themes of body, identity, and sexuality in family members’ narratives and to represent a family-level solution consisting of points along the interacting dimensions of nature versus culture, similarity versus difference, and stability versus fluidity. According to Straus and Corbin (1998), when building theory inductively, researchers need to examine the representativeness of concepts (e.g., the content themes of body, identity, and sexuality) and how the concepts vary dimensionally (e.g., on the dialectical dimensions of nature vs. culture, similarity vs. difference, and stability vs. fluidity).

We hope that both qualitative and quantitative researchers use this dialectical model to interrogate the social discourse that reproduces gender in families. Future analysis of family members’ body, identity, or sexuality discourse may reveal that some dialectical locations do not exist for some families (Reiss, 1981). Of course, additional gender-discourse themes also may be identified, especially if family scholars are careful not to reinforce dichotomous gender categories. The heuristic value of a dialectical model of family gender discourse is to encourage family scientists to view contextual variations in the social construction of gender as an active and dynamic performance of postmodern culture.

NOTE
Thanks to Amber Ault, Kristine M. Baber, and Leigh A. Leslie for their insightful comments on a previous version of this paper discussed at the Theory Construction and Research Methodology Workshop, National Council on Family Relations, Irvine, California, November 11, 1999. We are also indebted to Sara Rogers and Sarah L. Musham for help with data collection and coding and to Nathan Blume for technical assistance.

REFERENCES
to dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships. In B. M. Montgomery & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), Dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships (pp. 1–16). Mahweh, NJ: Erlbaum.


