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How Sex Selection Undermines Reproductive Autonomy

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Abstract Non-medical sex selection is premised on the notion that the sexes are not interchangeable. Studies of individuals who undergo sex selection for non-medical reasons, or who have a preference for a son or daughter, show that they assume their child will conform to the stereotypical roles and norms associated with their sex. However, the evidence currently available has not succeeded in showing that the gender traits and inclinations sought are caused by a "male brain" or a "female brain". Therefore, as far as we know, there is no biological reason why parents cannot have the kind of parenting experience they seek with a child of any sex. Yet gender essentialism, a set of unfounded assumptions about the sexes which pervade society and underpin sexism, prevents parents from realising this freedom. In other words, unfounded assumptions about gender constrain not only a child's autonomy, but also the parent's. To date, reproductive autonomy in relation to sex selection has predominantly been regarded merely as the freedom to choose the sex of one's child. This paper points to at least two interpretations of reproductive autonomy and argues that sex selection, by being premised on gender essentialism and/or the social pressure on parents to ensure their children conform to gender norms, undermines reproductive autonomy on both accounts.

Keywords Reproductive autonomy · Procreative liberty · Sexism · Gender · Sex selection

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Introduction

Non-medical sex selection (henceforth simply "sex selection") is often seen as problematic in countries that have a son preference but not in Western countries which appear to use sex selection for "gender balancing" (Dahl et al. 2006). Yet sex selection has also been critiqued by feminist scholars who contend that parents who undergo such sex selection, whether for sons, daughters, or "gender balancing", are heavily invested in having a child who adopts gender stereotypical traits (e.g. Berkowitz and Snyder 1998; Browne 2016; Davis 2009). For example, a parent who wishes to use sex selection in order to have a daughter is likely to be heavily invested in having a child who will conform to the gender roles, norms and stereotypes associated with being female, such as playing with dolls, dressing in pink frilly dresses, and going to ballet lessons. The parent is not likely to be open to a daughter who is a tomboy. The impact that such investment in gender stereotypes may have on the child's autonomy has been raised (Davis 1997, 2009) yet its impact on the *parent's* autonomy has thus far been unexplored. Some scholars have defended a parent's right to choose the sex of their child, stating that deciding what sort of child one

wishes to have constitutes part of a parent's reproductive autonomy (e.g. Harris 1998; Robertson 1994; Savulescu and Dahl 2000). To date, reproductive autonomy has been conceived simply as the freedom to choose whether or not to undergo sex selection. I argue that this understanding of reproductive autonomy is not the only one relevant to this context. I will present another account of reproductive autonomy and its implications for the sex selection debate.

My argument also sheds light on sex selection as one of the manifestations of the belief that sex=gender. Although policies on sex selection directly affect only the small percentage of people who seek to use the technology, policies can send a strong message to the community, particularly if they are accompanied by information which explains their rationale. Moreover, work undertaken by the government to tackle sexism in other ways would be undermined if it simultaneously upholds policies that allow sex selection, sending mixed messages. In this way, the effects of allowing sex selection stretch beyond its impact on those seeking to use it and extend to the wider community.

By ignoring the perceived freedom to have the sort of childrearing experience one desires, scholarship has overlooked another key argument against sex selection—that it may uphold a narrow sense of parental autonomy while simultaneously undermining a broader and more meaningful sense of parental autonomy. That is, what parents really want when seeking sex selection is the freedom to have the sort of parenting experience they desire. Yet by reinforcing the belief that the sexes are not interchangeable—that one cannot enjoy the same activities or have the same kind of relationship with a boy as with a girl (or vice versa)—sex selection undermines this autonomy.

It may seem counter-intuitive that providing individuals with more options can decrease their autonomy, but it points to two different ways of conceptualizing autonomy—one which I term "option and decision" heavy, and the other "ultimate goal" heavy. The former is primarily concerned with the range of choices on offer, such that maximising the range maximises this sense of autonomy. In the case of sex selection, permitting sex selection as one of the legal ways that prenatal technology can be used expands the number of choices, and thus one's autonomy in the "option and decision" heavy sense. On the other hand, the "ultimate goal" sense is concerned with maximising one's freedom to achieve a goal. In the case of sex selection, studies to date indicate that parents' ultimate goal for undertaking sex selection is to be able to enjoy certain activities and to have a certain kind of bond with their child. I first summarise the reasons provided by parents in Western countries for undergoing sex selection or for a sex preference before explaining the problem with those reasons. I then outline the traditional "option and decision" heavy conception of autonomy and some of its problems before presenting "ultimate goal" autonomy and the way that sex selection, by deriving its existence from gender essentialism and/or social pressure to conform to gender norms, undermines this autonomy. I argue that by basing its very existence on the assumption that the sexes are not interchangeable, sex selection reduces autonomy in two ways: 1) it clouds parents' perceptions of what is possible in parenting, and 2) it entrenches the current social pressure to raise the sexes in very different ways.

Reasons for Seeking Sex Selection

The reasons (compiled from empirical studies in the West) for why prospective parents prefer to have, or wish to select, a child of a certain sex, reveal that they are not concerned with the sex chromosomes, genitalia or secondary sex characteristics of their future child, but rather with gender characteristics. These studies show that parents undergo sex selection on the assumption that a child of a certain sex will conform to the gender roles, norms and stereotypes typically associated with that sex (Arnold and Kuo 1984; Goldberg 2009; Hammer and McFerran 1988; Hendl forthcoming; Sharp et al. 2010). These parents desire a certain type of parenting experience (e.g. a "mother-daughter bond", a "father-son bond"), to share certain activities with their child which they presume they can share more easily with one sex but not another (e.g. an interest in shopping, talking or dancing with a daughter, or playing sport or going fishing with a son), or a child who will have certain attributes, personality traits or roles associated with one gender such as childrearing or caregiving in the case of women, or taking over the family business or passing on the family name in the case of men. These motivations are ultimately driven by gender essentialism. Even the desire for "gender balance" is premised on the desire to have a child who conforms to the gender roles, norms and stereotypes associated with a child of the "opposite" sex to their current children (as well as the presumption of a gender binary). Parents who desire

a child of a particular sex thus appear to confound sex with gender. In other words, parental reasons for undergoing sex selection appear to rely on gender essentialism—the belief that these gender attributes are ingrained in a child's biology from birth.

The Problem with Gender Essentialism

The problem with gender essentialism is that despite a great deal of research over the last century, strong evidence to support it has failed to emerge. Cordelia Fine is among the scholars to highlight this issue, having conducted an extensive review and critical examination of the studies claiming to show that gender differences in behaviours, roles and tendencies are explained by neurological differences. In doing so, she reveals the flaws in all—ranging from problems with the reasoning on which the studies are based, to methodological flaws, to very small studies whose findings are not replicated (Fine 2010). The conclusion is that so far there is no good evidence to support the assumption that the psychological gender differences we see are neurologically hardwired. In fact, the brain is known for its plasticity. In other words, it is malleable and new neural connections are constantly formed through learning and experience. The brain is also much more "plastic" when we are children, so our childhood experiences are highly influential in determining how our brains "wire" themselves (Eliot 2012). We also know of the many social and cultural factors which influence the acquisition of gender differences. The types of role models, activities and information to which children are exposed help to create and reinforce differences between them.

We are thus left with the realisation that prospective parents who choose to undergo sex selection do so on the assumption that sex directly causes gender. Yet, as explained above, there is no good evidence to support the idea that gender, basically understood as the "socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women" (World Health Organization 2015) are directly caused by one's physiological sex, and certainly not that they are "hardwired". Companies that market sex selection services use the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably, promoting the idea that selecting sex is the same as selecting gender (Seavilleklein and Sherwin 2007) yet this is not the case. The point is lost not only on the clinics marketing these services, but also on the prospective parents who believe they are selecting a gender when in fact they are selecting a sex. This has implications for the legitimacy of the technology itself which, judging by the evidence so far (or lack thereof) cannot do what it purports to do. If individuals seek the technology for gender selection and it is marketed as such, but all it can deliver is sex, then it does not "do what it says on the tin" so to speak. Further, the state of the evidence also has implications for the main argument in favour of permitting sex selection technology—that it allows individuals greater reproductive autonomy.

"Option and Decision" Reproductive Autonomy

Autonomy is a difficult concept to define and is characterised in different ways in different contexts. Nevertheless, self-determination and self-government are usually central to the concept (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). In general, it refers to "the capacity to be one's own person, to live one's life according to reasons and motives that are taken as one's own and not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces" (Christman 2015). There has traditionally been an emphasis on independence and individualism within the concept of autonomy, but more recently, conceptions of autonomy as relational have emerged as alternatives to the traditional model (Christman 2015).

Reproductive autonomy has also traditionally been associated with more individualistic, libertarian approaches. This means that the right to reproductive autonomy is commonly viewed as a negative right—the freedom to make choices which satisfy individual preferences, free from external interference (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 5). Both John Robertson and John Harris believe that protecting reproductive autonomy means promoting procreative liberty (Harris 2010; Robertson 1994). For Robertson, this includes the freedom to choose the type of offspring one wishes to have. Procreative liberty, they believe, should take presumptive priority and only be limited if it were to cause serious harm. As John Harris states, "the presumption must be in favor of the liberty to access reproductive technologies and other means of founding families unless good and sufficient reasons can be shown against doing so" (Harris 2010, 74). While this may seem unproblematic, Gerald Dworkin notes that autonomy is

not the same as liberty (Dworkin 1988). The significance of this distinction will become apparent below.

Another problem with the "option and decision" heavy interpretation of reproductive autonomy is that placing an emphasis on maximising options in the name of combatting societal influences that threaten parental autonomy ironically ignores the role of societal influences on the choices it seeks to permit. Harris argues that "the best way to avoid totalitarianism, and to escape the possibility of … prejudice, either individual or social, dictating what sort of children people have, is to permit free parental choice in these matters … For such choices are for the most part likely to be as diverse as the people making them" (Harris 1998, 22). Here, Harris seems to assume that a diversity of choices indicates that those choices are free from prejudice. Yet as shown earlier, whether one sex is more popular among individuals seeking sex selection or whether males are requested just as often as females, the reasons provided for these choices are premised on gender essentialism and/or pressure to ensure one's child conforms to society's rigid gender binary. In other words, if it were not for prejudice, parents would not request sex selection in the first place.

There are other problems with the traditional conception of reproductive autonomy which has focused on choice—namely, that more choice is not always better than less (Dworkin 1988). Relatedly, the pressure felt by individuals to use a certain technology simply because it is available creates the paradox of increased choice known as the technological imperative (Rothman 2000; Zeiler 2004). It is not necessary to expand on these issues here except to note that even on the traditional conception of reproductive autonomy which focuses on increasing the number of options for reproduction, it is not obvious that adding an extra option is a good in itself. What I focus on now, however, is a deeper problem with this "option and decision" heavy sense of reproductive autonomy – that is, that it fails to capture what parents actually seek in their reproductive projects.

"Ultimate Goal" Reproductive Autonomy

Parents do not want to have children simply to reproduce their DNA. Such a motivation may be true of gamete donors, but those who wish to also *raise* children of their own also want a certain experience—the parenting experience. As Catherine Mills explains:

> … it is not simply genetic inheritance that establishes the importance of reproduction in people's lives; rather, it is the bonds of familial attachments, and the vulnerability and responsibility that they entail, in the variety of forms they take, that ensure the existential and ethical significance of reproduction (Mills 2011, 45).

Yet the way reproductive autonomy is commonly characterized takes a myopic view of the reproductive project by ignoring a key aspect of it—the rearing experience. Mills again picks up on this absence in her critique of the way that procreative liberty is construed by Robertson and Harris as a negative freedom. The case she makes for procreative liberty as a form of positive, not just negative, freedom plants the seeds for the account of autonomy I present here:

> [G]iven the significance of reproductive decision-making and the ongoing project of childrearing in the lives of parents, the construal of procreative liberty as negative freedom does not do full justice to the nature of the freedom entailed in such choices and the life plans of which they form a part … [P]rocreative liberty can also be seen as a form of positive freedom, here understood as freedom based on a capacity to shape one's own goals and values and to adopt and practice subjective ways of being that accord with those. (Mills 2011, 46)

Harris and Robertson both base the presumptive priority of reproductive autonomy on the importance that reproduction has for an individual's life, but their construal of reproductive autonomy as merely freedom of choice fails to capture that importance (and ignores the distinction between liberty and autonomy).

"Ultimate goal" autonomy captures the deeper, more meaningful sense of reproductive autonomy to which Mills is referring. While the "option and decision" heavy sense of autonomy emphasises the importance of the absence of external constraints on the freedom to act or to choose, the "ultimate goal" sense emphasises the ability to enact ways of living that are in line with the values central to one's life. Rather than simply the freedom to choose between an array of offspring with

different characteristics or the means by which one can produce them, it instead focusses on what it is that parents seek to achieve by having children in the first place. After all, the ability to choose the sorts of children one has—e.g. with or without deafness, cystic fibrosis, or Down Syndrome—is itself a means to achieving a reproductive goal—a certain type of parenting experience.

Gender Essentialism Threatens Reproductive Autonomy

What sex selection does, however, is to reinforce beliefs which are not evidence-based—the belief that certain life plans and parenting goals can only be achieved with a child of a certain sex. This belief undermines reproductive autonomy in both the senses outlined above. In the "option and decision" sense, in order for a choice to be autonomous, correct information is necessary (Beauchamp and Childress 1994; Sjöstrand et al. 2013). John Stuart Mill (2003, 158) provides an example of a man about to cross a damaged bridge. If we are not sure whether he knows about the damage, then we are justified in stopping him before he crosses and telling him this information. He can then make an autonomous choice as to whether or not to cross. In the case of sex selection, the bare minimum would be to do likewise and provide individuals with information about the current state of the evidence (or lack thereof) regarding gender essentialism before they proceed with sex selection. Yet, as I will outline below, gender essentialism undermines reproductive autonomy not only in the "option and decision" sense but also in the "ultimate goal" sense. This undermines the main justification for permitting sex selection—maximizing reproductive autonomy. Without this justification, it is difficult to see on what leg sex selection could possibly stand.

Dena Davis argues that the child's right to an open future can, in the context of sex selection, be understood as a right to be raised in an environment free from the imposition of gender expectations (whether implicit or explicit) (Davis 2009). Yet if parents espouse gendered expectations of a child, it is not only a child's autonomy which is limited, but also their own. For instance, a father who wishes to have a son so that he can play baseball with him assumes that he could not enjoy playing baseball with a daughter. Such a belief limits not only the daughter's possibilities, but also the father's, as he labours under the belief that in order to enjoy these activities with his child, his child much be of the "right" sex. However, as discussed earlier, there is no evidence to support such a belief. In believing so, he deprives not only his daughter, but also himself of an activity he could potentially enjoy with his daughter if he were not so encumbered by gender stereotypes.

Similarly, there are many women who wish to have a daughter in order to have a close "mother-daughter bond" (e.g. Hendl forthcoming). Such a woman presumes that she cannot have the sort of relationship with a son that she could have with a daughter. This presumption may have an impact on her daughter if she fails to fulfil her mother's gender assumptions, and could also have an impact on her son by depriving him of the potential for a close bond with his mother. Further, a mother who wishes to have a daughter because she believes she could only have a close bond with a girl also deprives herself of the possibility of having a close bond with her son. When one realises that there is no good evidence so far to suggest that boys are neurologically predisposed, let alone "hard-wired", to be a certain way, the sort of characteristics/interests/activities that one believes are essential to a "mother-daughter bond" may at least be given room to emerge. A boy may well enjoy shopping, dancing and talking, and if free from gender stereotypes, parents may even be able to cultivate such characteristics, or such a bond, in their child, rendering it possible to have the elements of a "mother-daughter bond" in sons or a "father-son bond" in daughters (and likewise for opposite-sex bonds). According to current evidence (or lack thereof) there is no reason why a close relationship cannot be enjoyed with a child of any sex. Yet by precluding this possibility in advance, parents limit their own parenting experience. Thus, unfounded assumptions about gender limit not only what is possible for the child, but also what is possible for the parent.

Correct information is therefore necessary not only for the ability to make informed choices from a range of options ("option and decision" autonomy) but also for "ultimate goal" autonomy because, as Sjöstrand et al. (2013, 712) note, "People lacking information relevant for a decision are less likely to decide on a course of action conducive to their goals (other than by pure

chance) …" Gerald Dworkin provides an example of how the lack of information or incorrect information can undermine autonomy, and simultaneously highlights the distinction between autonomy and liberty:

> Deception is not a way of restricting liberty. The person who, to use Locke's example, is put into a cell and convinced that all the doors are locked (when, in fact, one is left unlocked) is free to leave the cell. But because he cannot—given his information—avail himself of this opportunity, his ability to do what he wishes is limited. Self-determination can be limited in other ways than by interferences with liberty. (Dworkin 1988, 14)

Likewise, by reinforcing the belief that the sexes are not interchangeable—that one cannot enjoy the same activities or have the same relationship with a male or a female or an intersex child—the availability of sex selection provides a scientific and medical veneer to an unsubstantiated belief. Sex selection is thus not merely a symptom of gender essentialism, but serves to perpetuate it. This unsubstantiated belief, in turn, can cloud a parent's perception of what is and is not possible in childrearing. To use Dworkin's language, they are free to have the sort of rearing experience they want with a child of any sex. However, because they cannot—given the gender essentialism that pervades society and is reinforced by the availability of sex selection—avail themselves of this opportunity, their ability to enact their parenting goals is limited. The parents' autonomy in the "ultimate goal" sense, though not their freedom, is compromised.

I am not stating that choosing "wrongly" undermines autonomy, but that unfounded assumptions undermine one's perception of what is possible—in other words, they needlessly constrain one's choices and in doing so, limit one's autonomy. If we permit sex selection, we are only protecting a very narrow sense of autonomy—the freedom to make mistakes, or to choose based on unfounded assumptions. In contrast, the ability to act from knowledge rather than ignorance is a much richer sense of autonomy, and presumably the kind that individuals would rather be in possession of. As such, it is far more freeing to give individuals the truth rather than to allow them to make choices in the dark. Uncovering the truth that there is no good evidence to support the view that gender traits are biologically ingrained would allow parents to see that they have more freedom than they realised to have the sort of parenting experience they want.

In parallel with Davis' argument, the more hardship and expense parents are willing to undergo to select the sex of their child, the more invested they are in unfounded assumptions about gender, and thus the more their own autonomy is undermined. Yet my argument differs from Davis' in that it is not dependent on how much hardship and expense the parent is willing to undergo. Davis states that:

> The more time, money, and travel that a parent invests in directed procreation, and the more inconvenience, physical discomfort, and medical risk that the parent bears, the more I fear that the parent will feel entitled to the desired result. As market forces and medical research make such investments relatively trivial, the less I fear that effect" (Davis 2009, 27).

While the degree of risk, hardship and expense parents are willing to undergo indicates the strength of their investment in gender assumptions, I argue that *any* investment in gender assumptions is problematic. Thus, any technique used by parents to select their child based on gender when in fact all it can do is to select based on sex is likely premised on an unfounded assumption. That unfounded assumption, in turn, restricts one's perceived choices and possibilities as a parent. As shown in the following section, gender stereotypes and prejudice impact on their lives and parenting experiences, not just on the lives of their children.

Being free of gender essentialist beliefs has further implications for the debate on sex selection. If being "open to the unbidden" and to diversity in our children is a parental virtue (as scholars such as Sandel (2004) have argued), then when parents realize that their assumptions about gender are unfounded, they would render themselves open to the possibility that a daughter could exhibit "boyish" traits and behaviour and vice versa. In other words, letting go of gender essentialist beliefs should enhance openness to diversity in one's children because it entails relinquishing expectations that could hamper the ability to accept a child's gender non-conformist inclinations.

Even if sound evidence were to emerge showing that the sexes are biologically predisposed towards certain behaviours and activities from birth, this fact alone

would not prove that sexist, sex-segregated practices are good and should remain in place. To make such a claim would be to commit the is-ought fallacy. As Cordelia Fine and Emma Rush (2016, 5) state, " … the mere establishment of such predispositions does not, on its own, indicate an ethical imperative to socially support the reinforcement and elaboration of differentiation of sex differences in predispositions via gender socialisation practices". Fine and Rush note that evolutionary psychologists (e.g. Wilson, Dietrich, and Clark 2003) who posit that men have evolved to rape in certain circumstances are quick to point out that we should not draw any moral conclusions from such explanations because being "natural" does not make something right. Likewise, even if it became apparent that the sexes have natural inclinations towards certain attributes, behaviours and activities, it would still leave open the question of whether those inclinations should be reinforced or changed.[1] Currently, the social climate works to reinforce differences, ignoring the question of whether or not that is the right thing to do and rendering it very difficult for parents who would rather change such inclinations to do so, let alone parents who would simply refrain from reinforcing them.

In relation to sex selection, its existence is premised on the notion that the sexes are not, or should not, be interchangeable—that there are certain differences between the sexes which either cannot, or should not, be changed—and that it is permissible to act accordingly. Given the problems with the studies so far that purport to show differences in biological predispositions, we can at least say that without information about these issues being available to prospective parents, their autonomy is undermined as per the deception in the Dworkin example cited earlier. Yet as explained in the following section, even those who are privy to this information, or not basing their reproductive decisions on it, also find their autonomy compromised by the gender roles and norms with which they feel pressured to ensure their children conform. By resting its purpose on these factors that serve to undermine parental autonomy, sex selection becomes complicit in it.

It is worth noting that since gender essentialist beliefs are widespread, it is not only the parents who choose to pursue sex selection whose autonomy is undermined. There are many parents who may not choose to undergo sex selection but who are nevertheless bound by unfounded assumptions about gender and as a result, their perceptions of the sort of parenting experiences they can have with their children are also impacted. By reinforcing gender essentialism, the impact of sex selection stretches beyond the families produced by this technology to the autonomy of all parents and to the wider community.

It is not likely, but nevertheless possible, that a parent's wish for a son or daughter is not premised on some form of gender essentialism. Davis provides the following example: "Feminist parents might well want a girl in order to groom her to be the first female president" (Davis 2009, 26). Davis argues that the degree of parental hardship and investment into such an outcome would make it difficult for them to be accepting if their child chooses a different path. To this, I note that such feminist desires have not been expressed by parents in the studies conducted thus far of parental reasons for sex selection. Even if there are parents who have reasons for sex selection that are not based on gender essentialism, such parents would likely be few and far between, and where they exist, should (if they are indeed feminist) be willing to sacrifice such preferences for the fight against sexism since that, not merely a series of "female firsts," is feminism's main focus. Similarly, if there are prospective parents who seek sex selection because they do in fact want a child with particular sex chromosomes or genitalia, it is hard to see how such physiological characteristics would, in and of themselves, make a difference to one's childrearing experience, and hence why it should be accorded moral weight. Moreover, as Stephen Wilkinson (2008) notes, if a parent wishes to share the experience of childbirth, menstruation or erectile function (or dysfunction) with another, such experiences can be shared with other friends or relatives and do not necessarily have to be shared with a child.

Social Pressure Threatens Reproductive Autonomy

Another possible motivation for pursuing sex selection is that parents want a child of a particular sex not because they hold gender essentialist beliefs themselves, but because society renders it much easier to enjoy certain activities or to have a certain sort of relationship if one has a child whose sex matches the activities and type of relationship stereotypically associated with it.

[1] Although, since ought implies can, the degree to which any such inclinations (if they exist) can be changed would affect how much gender equality we could realistically aspire to achieve (Kennett 2011).

Given the pressure that parents find themselves under to ensure that their child conforms to gender norms (as recounted below) such a motivation may well be possible, but reveals yet another threat to autonomy. As Kristin Zeiler (2004, 181) articulates in her own critique of autonomous choice in reproductive decisions, "If societal attitudes are understood as constraints on reproductive autonomy, they are so to the extent that they hamper couples with regard to *making a certain decision* (e.g. when couples see a certain decision as being too difficult to live with in a certain society)".

The pressure to make sure that one's child conforms to gender norms affects almost all parents, whether or not one endorses those norms or wishes to break free from them (Kane 2012). Such pressure is even more keenly felt by parents seeking to buck traditional gender norms in parenting. These parents find themselves in what Emily Kane calls the "gender trap" of social expectations that effectively limit a parent's ability to raise their child in the way they wish if doing so goes against society's strict gender binary. Kane provides an example of this when she recounts the difficulties she faced in trying to raise her own sons in a gender neutral way so that they felt free to take up a variety of activities and interests without feeling constrained by gender expectations. At her five-year-old son's after-school care in the United States, his friends played with playing cards that featured combat imagery. She objected to the fighting culture that this promoted so as a compromise, gave him a set of plain playing cards instead. But his fellow boys were not interested in these cards at all and left him alone. When she picked him up, he was sitting alone and crying. At this point, Kane describes:

> I thought hard about the price [my sons] would pay if they could not participate in the culture of their fellow boys. I soon relented, buying each the trading cards they wanted. This was but one in a long line of careful calculations I had made about their expression of gender in relation to the class- and race-specific gendered culture of their white, middle- to upper-middle-class environment. As a parent I had significant power in making those calculations, but my actions were inseparable from my children's own desires and the social world around them. (Kane 2012, 2)

Kate Henley Averett and Elizabeth Rahilly's studies also show that parents who attempt to transgress the gender binary feel the weight of social pressure, both when they anticipate the repercussions they or their children may face and when they actually face those repercussions (Averett 2015; Rahilly 2015). For instance, one of the women in Averett's study describes how simply dressing her son in a pink shirt generated judgement from a stranger, which provoked much agitation and anxiety for her (Averett 2015). Such incidents illustrate Rahilly's point that "gender proves as much a set of cultural dictates to which parents feel beholden as it does a given 'truth' about their child's sex, which offers little reference for their child's persistent preferences and behaviors" (Rahilly 2015, 347). In this way, cultural dictates concerning gender impede one's autonomy to parent as one wishes.

Further, if social pressure to conform to these cultural dictates is used as a justification for allowing parents to use sex selection, policymakers and professional bodies would be capitulating to such sexism and entrenching the very culture that causes people to feel compelled to make such choices in the first place. Such a policy affects not only those who would choose sex selection, but all parents who feel pressured to conform to gender norms in their parenting. I recognise the tension in which such a position places many feminists. As Diana Meyers explains, "If women's professed desires are products of their inferior position, should we give credence to those desires? If so, we seem to be capitulating to institutionalized injustice by gratifying warped desires. If not, we seem to be perpetuating injustice by showing disrespect for those individuals" (Meyers 1989, xi). Meyers' response to this dilemma is that not all desires should be accorded equal weight. Some desires arise from positions of autonomy more than others, and are therefore more authentic. If desires are the result of unreflective acceptance of social norms and pressures, their autonomy is questionable and it is that, not the content of the desire, which makes it less worthy of being satisfied.

By realising that gender traits are not fixed but shaped by culture, we should come to realise that just as culture can, and does, change, so it is with gender traits, roles and norms. Not only is it within our power to change our culture, but since it is a sexist culture, it is something we *should* change. Of course, if parents want a child who will do "boyish things" it may well be difficult for them to go against the grain and to socialise a daughter into boyish activities rather than a son (at least in the short-term) as it is not only parents but also

society which exerts its pressure on children. However, banning sex selection and raising awareness of the unfounded beliefs behind gender essentialism should make it easier in the long-term for parents to raise their children free from this sort of pressure.

Finally, people may be free to disregard the evidence, to hold sexist beliefs and to raise their children to conform to sexist stereotypes if they wish, but professional organisations and policymakers should not stand for unfounded, sexist beliefs. As with most aspects of life, the values we expect public institutions, and even many private organizations, to adopt, and the values we expect families to espouse, are two very different things. This is not to say that parenting in gender-rigid ways is not problematic, but there are limits to how much and at what point the government (or other external bodies) can realistically intervene when it comes to parenting. What these organisations *can* do, however, is to set standards to which families can aspire and to raise awareness of the latest information arising from reviews of studies on gender. If society strives to achieve gender equality, then permitting sex selection is at odds with that goal. As Meyers contends, some desires come from positions of autonomy more than others. I would add to this that some desires also arise from sexist beliefs more than others. As such, not all desires should be deemed worthy of fulfilment. If policymakers and professional organisations are sincere in promoting gender equality, their policies should remain consistent with that goal.

Conclusion

Studies suggest that individuals who choose to undergo sex selection do so in order to have a child who will enable them to enjoy a certain type of childrearing experience. Their underlying assumption is that a child of the sex they seek will conform to the stereotypical roles and norms associated with that sex. However, the current state of the evidence does not support the assumption that the ability to enjoy certain activities and to have certain relationships can only be realised with a child of one sex. The gender essentialism on which sex selection is based therefore appears to unnecessarily limit the sorts of relationships and experiences parents believe to be possible with a male, female or intersex child. Parents may therefore be freer than they realise to cultivate and enjoy the parenting experience they desire with a child of any sex. Raising awareness of how unfounded society's assumptions about gender actually are should also reduce the pressure on parents to raise their children according to stereotypical roles and norms.

By deriving from, and feeding into, gender essentialism and society's rigid gender binary, the availability of sex selection technology clouds a parent's perceptions of what is possible in parenting and entrenches the current social pressure to raise the sexes in very different ways. It therefore constrains reproductive autonomy in both the "option and decision" sense as well as the "ultimate goal" sense. Further, because sex selection is fundamentally driven by gender essentialism and/or the social pressure to raise children in ways which conform to a rigid gender binary, the technology is not only redundant but is complicit in entrenching both.

Although I have situated my critique in policies that permit sex selection, the focus of my argument has been the reasoning on which such policies are based, which rely on the conflation of sex with gender. That is, the primary argument for allowing sex selection—that it enables reproductive autonomy—rests on the assumption that sex=gender because, as the argument goes, parents who wish to select the *gender* of their child should have the freedom to do so. Yet if the sex=gender equation is unfounded, then parents are not in fact selecting what they think they are selecting and the unfounded assumption undermines their autonomy in another, more important, sense. Thus, the argument collapses. Professional organisations and policymakers should stand for evidence-based policy which promotes rather than undermines gender equality, and which promotes rather than undermines autonomy.

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