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Not Fitting In: The Impact of Gender Atypicality  
on Middle Schoolers' Psychosocial Adjustment

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Art  
in Education

by

Manpreet Dhillon Brar

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Not Fitting In: The Impact of Gender Atypicality  
on Middle Schoolers' Psychosocial Adjustment

by

Manpreet Dhillon Brar

Master of Art in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Sandra H. Graham, Chair

The current study examined self-perceived gender atypicality (i.e., not fitting in with one's gender) in relation to psychosocial adjustment among ethnically diverse adolescents. A growing body of evidence supports negative associations between self-perceived gender atypicality and gender-based bullying and discrimination (Jewell & Brown, 2014). The goal of the current study was to establish whether gender atypicality predicted loneliness, anxiety, victimization, and gender discrimination and if deviating from one's own gender and ethnic group norms placed youth at a higher risk. This study addressed a gap in the existing gender atypicality literature; that is, prior work mostly studied white youth (Egan & Perry, 2001) and did not take into account deviation from gender and ethnic ingroup norms. Using an ethnically diverse sample of seventh graders ( $n = 3,788$ ) from urban middle schools, findings from general linear models documented that gender atypicality (self-perceived and when using the deviation from gender

and ethnic ingroup norms) predicted higher negative psychosocial outcomes. These relationships were moderated by ethnicity and gender, following an intersectionality framework, among which White youth were found to be feeling more lonely, anxious, and reported higher frequency of gender based discrimination, when they deviated in gender atypicality from other White youth at their school. Implications for particular adolescents who may be at higher risk of poor adjustment are discussed.

The thesis of Manpreet Dhillon Brar is approved.

Rashmita S. Mistry

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Sandra H. Graham, Committee Chair

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2018

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## Not Fitting In: The Impact of Gender Atypicality on Middle Schoolers' Psychosocial Outcomes

As young people develop and construct their social identities, they become increasingly sensitive to the social norms within their peer group. Increased salience of social cues and norms, along with the onset of puberty, have been shown to contribute to heightened victimization and decreased tolerance for difference among adolescents (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011), along with a pronounced increase in peer bullying and harassment (Graham, Bellmore, Nishina & Juvonen, 2009). In trying to understand the experiences of youth dealing with bullying and discrimination, including teasing and exclusion from peers, researchers have focused on examining the risk factors associated with precursors of victimization. In doing so, understanding the context under which victimization becomes worse is critical, as is identifying particular subgroups (e.g. gender atypical youth and ethnic minorities) that may be especially disadvantaged. As such, the purpose of the current study was to examine associations between gender atypicality status as a particularly vulnerable subgroup and psychosocial adjustment, with ethnicity and gender as key moderators, consistent with an intersectionality framework.

Gender atypicality is defined as the extent to which one does not feel like a typical example of one's own-gender category (Egan & Perry, 2001). Feelings of gender atypicality have been linked to poor psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Carver et al., 2003), and the bullying and harassment targeted toward gender atypical children has been documented as early as the preschool years where gender atypical children have been shown to be more likely to elicit teasing, dislike, and physical aggressions from their peers (Fagot, 1977; Langlois & Downs, 1980).

Egan and Perry (2001) became pioneers of the research on gender atypicality with their groundbreaking work on the different aspects of gender identity. The authors highlighted gender identity as a multidimensional construct made up of various measures including gender labeling, typicality, contentedness, and felt pressure for conformity to norms. Gender atypicality is an aspect of gender identity that has to do with how much youth do not feel like typical members of their own gender group. To study the impact of peer groups and psychosocial adjustment on various gender and ethnic groups, gender atypicality is a key construct to examine, especially as it focuses on self-perception of atypicality.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

*Social Identity Theory* states that identification with a social group impacts how people perceive and evaluate themselves as well as others; it also affects how individuals navigate their social worlds (Ruble et al., 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For youth, the social groups they belong to have an added importance to their sense of well-being as these groups often become the source of the critical information youth receive to make sense of who they are. Additionally, being a part of a social group and having social identities (the sense of “we-ness” that develops from being a member of a social group) help youth make sense of who they want to be. Social identities, such as race and gender, are important because they can influence how youth judge themselves and how they evaluate and interact with others (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Bouchey & Harter, 2005).

Extant research has documented that racial and gender identities, separately, play a central role in youths’ understanding of who they should be and who they are (see Quintana, 2007 for an example of race focus; see Martin & Ruble, 2009 as an example for gender identity; Rogers, Scott, & Way, 2015). While focusing on how children’s racial and gender identities, as

distinct identities, are linked to their psychosocial outcomes during adolescence (Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Ruble et al., 2004), we need to also focus on the intersections across racial and gender identities and their joint influence on adjustment (Rogers, Scott, & Way, 2015). This joined influence of multiple social identities and how they interact on multiple levels to result in perceptions of unfair treatment, along with an examination of the influences of power, privilege and inequalities, is at the core of an *intersectionality framework* (Cole, 2009). In the sections that follow, I will describe the current state of the literature on gender atypicality, leading to a description of an intersectionality framework and how an intersectional lens was used in this study to understand the individual, as well as collective roles, of ethnic and gender identities on gender atypicality.

### **Review of Literature on Gender Atypicality**

Recently, studies stemming from Egan and Perry's (2001) conceptualization of gender identity have illustrated the complexity of adherence to gender norms (Lurye et al., 2008), but have rarely documented how the adherence to gender norms varies by ethnic group. Even historically, with the *gender intensification hypothesis*, Hill and Lynch (1983) argued that during adolescence, the physical and social changes come with an added awareness of and interest in gender so the extent to which youth feel they fit in with their gender category has an impact on how they adjust psychologically and socially during the adolescent period. These impacts on psychosocial adjustment for youth who do not feel they fit in with their gender category may differ by gender and racial/ethnic identities. Additionally, these experiences may differ as a function of the racial/ethnic and gender groups youth are comparing themselves to. In the sections that follow, I highlight some gender and race differences documented in research on gender identity and atypicality.

**Gender differences.** Prior research has consistently documented gender differences in self-perceived gender atypicality, generally finding that boys view themselves as more similar to same-gender others or in other words, as more gender typical, than girls (Egan & Perry, 2001; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). In their study examining the effects of negative peer relations on gender-based harassment, Lee and Troop-Gordon (2011) found that gender atypicality was associated with negative peer relations for adolescent boys but not for girls, showing that perhaps boys are subject to worse outcomes when they are gender atypical. Gender has played a significant moderating role such that boys and girls<sup>1</sup> have been shown to face different repercussions by peers for their gender atypical status (Leaper & Brown, 2008).

The research documenting the differential sensitivity and outcomes of girls and boys, given certain perceptions and experiences, provides support for using gender as a critical moderator when studying vulnerable adolescents. I add to other researchers' call for using gender as a moderator by showing that not only should we examine gender differences across groups (boys vs. girls), but we should also examine differences within gender categories (girls vs. girls) when studying marginalized populations (Mays & Ghavami, in press). I will explain how we used this approach at a later point in this paper.

**Race/ethnicity differences.** Another identity adolescents hold that plays a key role in their peer relationships is race/ethnicity. While research examining differences in victimization and harassment among boys and girls based on gender atypicality has been conducted, we know much less about the experiences of gender atypical youth from different ethnic groups in schools, as most of the work has been conducted with White youth. Generally, research on group norms

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<sup>1</sup> Although the majority of previous research has recognized gender as a binary category, I recognize that gender is a non-binary social construct.

has shown that children who do not fit the norms endorsed by their group are susceptible to bullying, mocking, and ostracism by group members (Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, & Ferrell, 2007). These findings are supported by the *marginality hypothesis framework* which suggests that simply having a marginal status is sufficient to receive negative social feedback (Prentice, & Trail, 2010; Sweeting & West, 2001). Gender atypicality may be one aspect of difference, which increases vulnerability to victimization. However, individuals hold multiple social identity statuses simultaneously so the impact of not fitting in to one's gender may vary by the ethnic group an individual belongs to. Since race/ethnicity represents a salient marker of adolescent identity, it is likely that gender atypicality is largely based on the race/ethnic group one belongs to; the sense of gender atypicality is likely formed at least in part through comparisons between one's self and specifically other members of one's same gender and race/ethnic group.

### **Interactions of Ethnicity and Gender**

An intersectional approach examines the ways in which various socially constructed categories (e.g. ethnicity and gender) interact on multiple levels (Ghavami, Katsiaficas, & Rogers, 2016) and how this interaction may result in perceptions of unfair treatment (Andersen & Collins, 2009). Research on discrimination using an intersectional framework takes as a starting point that specific types of discrimination are related and may occur at the intersection of multiple social categories like ethnicity and gender (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2010). Examining differences in peer related outcomes as predicted by gender atypicality show whether gender atypical youth experience more or less negative psychosocial outcomes. However, an intersectional approach addresses whether there are specific subgroups (ethnic or gender) who experience the worse outcomes. Therefore, I used an intersectional methodological approach for

this study, examining the relationship between gender atypicality and negative psychosocial outcomes, with ethnicity and gender as key moderators.

Gender identity research has rarely included youth of color, which is unlike the research on race that has examined multiple racial groups collectively. Rogers and colleagues (Rogers et al., 2015) utilized an intersectionality approach to examine the intersections of racial and gender identity development, patterns of change over time during middle adolescence and psychological, and academic outcomes among Black adolescent males attending a Black Male Charter School in the Midwest. The results indicated that race and gender identities were positively correlated with each other such that boys who felt race was important, also viewed gender as highly important. The key findings from this study highlighted the importance of using a within-group analysis design such that their results showed variability on racial and gender identities regardless of using an all-Black adolescent sample. Therefore, in addition to taking a comparative approach by examining gender and race/ethnicity as moderators, it is also important to examine within-group comparisons. In order to examine both cross-group comparisons as well as keeping this within-group emphasis in mind, I utilized a methodological approach that allowed me to classify youths' comparison group for reports of gender atypicality as their own gender and ethnic group. Such an approach can highlight nuances of identity processes beyond the surface of group differences when examining marginalization, consistent with an intersectionality framework.

### **The Current Study**

I conceptualized gender typicality and gender atypicality as related constructs. Most of the extant research on gender typicality has examined this construct as a continuum such that individuals low in typicality are synonymously considered atypical (Oswald, 2004). Because of

the methodological approach used in the current study, I examined gender typicality as a continuum so we used gender atypicality to describe someone who is low on gender typicality<sup>2</sup>. The primary goal of my research was to examine how negative psychosocial outcomes, loneliness, anxiety, peer victimization, and perceived gender discrimination, are associated with being gender atypical.

The current study had three aims. The first aim was to replicate the well-documented relationship between gender atypicality and negative psychosocial outcomes with an ethnically diverse sample. The second aim was to assess if this relationship differs as a function of race/ethnicity and gender. And, the third aim was to assess the role of specific group norms in this relationship by relating the gender atypicality scores reported by individual students to those of their ethnic and gender group averages (e.g. comparing each African American boy's gender atypicality to the average gender atypicality of the other African American boys in his school). My specific research questions were: (1) Does perceived gender atypicality predict more loneliness, more anxiety, more victimization, and more gender discrimination among a diverse sample of ethnically diverse adolescents? (2) Do race/ethnicity and gender moderate the relationship between perceived gender atypicality and psychosocial outcomes? and (3) Does perceived gender atypicality matter more when youth are being compared to others of their own race/ethnic and gender group versus compared with other race/ethnic and gender group peers? In other words, what is the role of deviating from one's own race/ethnic and gender group norm in gender atypicality and its consequences?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

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<sup>2</sup> I use gender atypicality to describe a construct rather than defining particular youth as atypical or not typical. The use of the term "gender atypicality" is consistent with conceptualization by other researchers.

The data for this study came from the UCLA Middle School Diversity Project (MSDP), a 3-year longitudinal study of 5,991 (52% girls) adolescents recruited from 26 urban middle schools in Northern and Southern California. The analytic sample for the current study included 3,788 participants (51% girls) and were gathered in the spring of seventh grade. Both gender and race/ethnicity were self-reported by participants. Based on student self-report, the subsample was 51% girls and 49% boys, 41% Latinx<sup>3</sup>, 29% White, 17% East/Southeast<sup>4</sup> Asian, and 13% African American/Black. Participants who self-reported as belonging to other racial/ethnic groups or to multiple racial/ethnic groups were removed from the analyses as their representation in the sample was insufficient for the race/ethnic group comparisons included in my research questions.

**Sampling of schools.** The schools for MSDP were selected in three cohorts through purposeful sampling to vary in school-based ethnic composition. The 26 schools represented a range of ethnic compositions including non-diverse or majority schools (i.e. majority Latinx, majority White, majority Asian, and majority Black), ethnically diverse schools (i.e. no single ethnic group comprised a majority of the population), and balanced schools (i.e. two ethnic groups made up at least 70% of the population). The ethnic diversity of the schools was most ideal for this study, not only for replication of gender atypicality findings with a diverse, urban sample but also for examining race/ethnicity as a critical moderator.

## **Procedure**

Participants were recruited in three cohorts, during the fall of their sixth-grade year. Parent consent packets were distributed to all students at each of the 26 middle schools. Prior to

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<sup>3</sup> Latinx is a gender-neutral term that is inclusive of all Latin American descendants, and is used here as an alternative to Latino, Latina, and Latin@ (Ramirez & Blay, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> South Asians were also excluded from the subsample because the group is very different from the combined group of East and Southeast Asian.



participation, written parent consents and student assent forms were obtained. For the larger longitudinal study, 83.1% of students were successfully recruited across all middle schools. Surveys containing all the self-report measures were administered to participants at school during non-academic courses. Participants followed instructions that were read aloud by trained research staff and the surveying process was monitored to answer student questions. Reminders about the confidential and voluntary nature of the survey were specified to the participants. A \$10 honorarium was given to the participants for completing the survey during each year.

## **Measures**

**Perceived gender atypicality.** Three items adapted from Egan and Perry (2001) were included to measure self-perceived gender typicality (e.g., “I feel like I am just like other girls/boys”). Participants rated the items on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time). Items were reverse coded such that higher scores indicated higher perceived atypicality ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Gender-atypicality-deviation (GAD).** Based on the responses to the gender atypicality questions, a composite score was calculated for each participant. To determine the degree to which each adolescent’s score deviated from his or her ethnic group’s gender atypicality norm, a difference score was calculated by subtracting participant’s gender atypicality score (calculated separately for each school) from that of his or her same-gender, same-ethnic group’s mean gender atypicality score. Participants ( $n=100$ ) were removed from the analytic sample because they attended schools with less than 10 students of their own ethnic and gender. Positive scores indicated greater deviation from one’s same-gender and same-ethnic peers at school on gender typicality (i.e., more gender atypicality), while negative scores indicated more perceived gender typicality.

**Loneliness.** A five-item version of the Asher and Wheeler's (1985) Loneliness Scale was used to measure feelings of loneliness at school (e.g., "I have nobody to talk to"). Participants rated the items on a scale from 1 (always true) to 5 (not true at all). Items were coded such that higher scores indicated more loneliness ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Social anxiety.** A six-item scale adapted from La Greca and Lopez (1998) measuring social anxiety (e.g., "I worry about what others say about me"). Participants rated the items on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (all the time). Higher scores indicated higher anxiety ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Peer Victimization.** A modified four-item version of the peer victimization survey (Neary & Joseph, 1994) measured the extent to which participants see themselves as being victims of physical, verbal, and relational peer victimization. For each item, participants were presented with two statements separated by the word "But" with each statement reflecting more or less victimization (e.g., "Some kids are often picked on by other kids BUT other kids are not picked on by other kids"). Participants chose one of the two alternatives and then indicated whether the selected alternative was "really true for me" or "sort of true for me". That created a 4-point scale for each item such that higher scores indicate more perceived peer victimization ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

**Perceived gender discrimination.** Four items modified from Phinney, Madden, and Santos (1998) were used as a measure of gender-based discrimination (e.g., other kids exclude you from their activities because of your gender). Participants rated each item on a scale from 1 (never) to 4 (a lot). Items were coded such that higher scores indicated more perceived gender discrimination from peers ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

**Covariates.** Two covariates were included in all analyses. Parent education served as a proxy for student socioeconomic status (SES). Parents or guardians who signed the parent

permission form (typically mothers) also completed a parent questionnaire in which they indicated their highest level of education on a 6-point scale (1= “elementary/junior high school” to 6= “graduate degree”) ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ).

The second covariate was perceived pubertal timing. Modified from Dubas, Graber and Petersen (1991) participants rated their physical development as compared with their same-sex and same-aged peers by responding to the question, “do you think you are developing faster or slower than most girls/boys your age?” on a 5-point scale (1= “much faster” to 5= “much slower”). The item was reverse coded such that higher values indicated faster pubertal timing.

### **Analytic Strategy**

To determine if gender atypicality and gender-atypicality-deviation (GAD) predicted negative psychosocial outcomes, general linear models were conducted twice: for gender atypicality and GAD as the independent variables and for each of the four outcomes, separately (i.e., loneliness, anxiety, victimization, gender discrimination). To examine the effect of gender atypicality and GAD on psychosocial adjustment outcomes, a series of general linear models were estimated. To ascertain whether these associations were moderated by gender and gender-by GAD interaction terms were added to the base model. For outcomes for which the interaction terms were significant, follow-up comparisons were stratified by gender. All models included pubertal development and parental education as covariates. The differences in the sample sizes were addressed by running each outcome variable separately and using listwise deletion. Since the missing data was part of a planned missingness design (Graham, Taylor, Olchowski, & Cumsille, 2006), the data were considered to be missing at random. Finally, Latinx students, as the largest group in the sample, served as the reference (omitted) group for all analyses. The

applicability of the results for all other racial/ethnic groups were assessed by rotating the reference group and all assumptions were checked.

## **Results**

### **Descriptives**

Table 1.1 displays the means and standard deviations for each of the variables. The correlations among all variables are included in Table 1.2. The correlations among the adjustment variables (loneliness, anxiety, victimization, and gender discrimination) were modest but significant (ranges from .52 to .19, all  $ps < .01$ ), suggesting that these are slightly overlapping but still distinct adjustment outcomes.

**Race/ethnic and Gender Differences in Gender Atypicality Scores.** To explore whether race/ethnicity and gender were related to perceived gender atypicality, we examined race/ethnic and gender differences in separate one-way analysis of variance (ANOVAS). The ANOVA for ethnicity revealed no statistically significant differences between the four pan ethnic groups on gender atypicality:  $F(3,3504) = .487$ ,  $MSE = 0.425$ ,  $p = .691$ . However, for gender, the one-way ANOVA revealed that girls reported feeling more gender atypical as compared to the boys in the overall sample,  $F(1, 3506) = 64.98$ ,  $MSE = 55.70$ ,  $p = .00$ . Because of these gender differences, the main analyses were run separately for boys and girls.

**Correlations Between Gender Atypicality and GAD.** The correlation between the gender atypicality and GAD was very high at .98 for both girls and boys, documenting that these are highly overlapping constructs. In other words, while participants were not asked questions specific to their same-ethnic and same-gender group, the high correlations suggest that they may be thinking of their same-ethnic and same-gender peers as the comparison group.

### **Gender Atypicality Associated with Psychosocial Outcomes for Diverse Adolescents**

To answer my first research question, and to replicate findings from the existing literature with an ethnically diverse sample, I examined whether perceived gender atypicality predicted more loneliness, anxiety, victimization, and gender-based discrimination. Regression coefficients are reported in Table 2 for effects of gender atypicality on the four outcomes for girls and boys, separately. All coefficients were significant, indicating that for both girls and boys, gender atypicality was associated with more loneliness, anxiety, victimization, and gender-based discrimination.

### **Gender-Atypicality-Deviation (GAD) and Psychosocial Outcomes**

To answer my second research question and to examine the role of deviating from one's own ethnic and gender group norm in gender atypicality, I used the gender-atypicality-deviation (GAD) score that was calculated by subtracting individual participant's gender atypicality score from that of her or his same-gender, same-ethnic group's mean gender atypicality score. Results of the general linear models (GLM) indicated that GAD significantly predicted all four outcome variables such that kids who deviated more from their same-ethnic/same-gender group in the direction of more gender atypicality reported feeling lonelier, more anxious, perceived more victimization, and reported more frequent instances of gender discrimination from their peers (see regression coefficients in Table 3 and 4).

**Ethnicity and Gender as Moderators.** To examine my third research question, I tested two-way and three-way interactions with ethnicity and gender as moderators. For loneliness, this main effect was qualified by a significant ethnicity-by-GAD interaction,  $F(3, 1962) = 8.62$ ,  $MSE = 4.13$ ,  $p = .00$  but a two-way interaction of gender-by-GAD was not statistically significant. Both two-way interactions (ethnicity-by-GAD and gender-by-GAD) were significant for gender atypicality deviation on anxiety with gender  $F(1, 3009) = 15.44$ ,  $MSE = 7.50$ ,  $p = .00$ , as well as

with ethnicity  $F(3, 3009) = 15.44$ ,  $MSE = 7.50$ ,  $p=.00$ . Similarly, significant two-way interactions were found for GAD by gender  $F(1, 3001) = 4.91$ ,  $MSE = 0.77$ ,  $p=.03$  and by ethnicity  $F(3, 3001) = 4.89$ ,  $MSE = 0.72$ ,  $p=.00$  on perceived gender-based discrimination. Neither of the two-way interactions, gender-by-GAD and ethnicity-by-GAD were significant in predicting victimization, suggesting that all kids who feel they deviate more from their ethnic and gender group norm feel victimized. None of the three-way interactions, gender-by-ethnicity-by-GAD, yielded significant findings. Regression coefficients are reported in table 3 for girls and Table 4 for boys.

Significant ethnic differences for girls were only found with White girls where they reported significantly more loneliness ( $B = 0.20$ ,  $SEB = 0.06$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [0.08, 0.31]), marginally more anxiety, and more gender discrimination ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $SEB = 0.03$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.12]), when they deviated more and were more gender atypical from other White girls at their school compared to Latina girls who moved away from the gender atypicality for their group.

For boys, several significant interactions of ethnicity were found. White boys also reported perceiving more gender discrimination ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $SEB = 0.03$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.10]) when they deviated from and were more gender atypical than other White boys in their school and also felt marginally lonelier. Asian boys were lonelier ( $B = 0.24$ ,  $SEB = 0.08$ ,  $p < .01$ , 95% CI [0.09, 0.39]) if they deviated more from other Asian boys at their school, compared to Latinx boys who deviated. The opposite effect was found for Black boys where they reported feeling less anxious ( $B = -0.12$ ,  $SEB = 0.06$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI [-0.23, -0.01]) and perceived less gender discrimination ( $B = -0.06$ ,  $SEB = 0.03$ ,  $p < .05$ , 95% CI [-0.12, 0.01]) when they deviated more from other Black boys at their school.

## Discussion

Gender atypicality, defined as a feeling of dissimilarity to others within one's gender category, is a construct that has been robustly related to negative psychosocial outcomes. My study sought to further the field's understanding of the relationship between gender-related self-perceptions and psychosocial outcomes using a diverse group of adolescent youth from urban middle schools who have been missing from most studies on gender atypicality. In particular, this study aimed to identify particular subgroups of adolescents who may be especially vulnerable given their feelings of atypicality, when compared to their peers of same-ethnic and same-gender identities.

Consistent with prior research, the relationship between gender atypicality and all outcomes was found to be significant regardless of ethnicity and gender. While previous studies (e.g., Carver et al., 2003; Egan & Perry, 2001; Yunger et al., 2004) examining the link between gender atypicality and psychosocial adjustment variables have been conducted with mainly White participants, the current study assessed this relationship within the context of an ethnically diverse sample. Youths' perceptions of their own dissimilarity to others within their same gender group may depend on their conceptions of normative attributes and behaviors for each gender group and the extent to which they have internalized such norms. In other words, the process of gender socialization contributes to the formation of a self-perception of gender atypicality and most researchers contend that this process varies between racial and ethnic groups (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995; Hill, 2002). Thus, it was likely that relationships between gender atypicality and psychosocial adjustment among the adolescents in the current study would vary across ethnic groups. I did find that the impact of gender atypicality on psychosocial outcomes varied by ethnic and gender groups in my sample.

There are three main takeaways from my findings. First, the marginal statuses that youth may hold, such as perceived gender atypicality, must be examined with attention to differences in the ethnic and gender group norms. In our study, participants of different racial/ethnic identities did not report differently on gender atypicality at a descriptive level. However, when examining our outcomes of loneliness, anxiety, and gender-based discrimination, we did find racial/ethnic differences. Second, it is important to examine who sets the norm. Specifically, the norm is not what the gender norms are on a school campus in general, but vary by social identities such as ethnicity and gender. We know that youth are attentive to their peer group norms during adolescence (Harris, 1995 as cited in Menon, Schellhorn, & Lowe, 2013), but, these norms vary by the ethnic and gender identities youth hold. I found support for varying ethnic and gender group norms for gender atypicality by examining whether different ethnic youth reported feelings of loneliness, anxiety, victimization, and gender-based discrimination when being compared to their own-gender and own-ethnic group norms at their school, using our gender-atypicality-deviation (GAD) variable. Lastly, I found great overlap between self-reported gender atypicality and GAD (deviation from same-ethnic and same-gender atypicality) which suggests that perhaps youth are using their own ethnic and gender group as their reference group when thinking about who they feel most atypical compared to. The latter is consistent with an intersectionality framework which suggests we must examine across group differences (Black boys vs. White boys) and within group differences (Black girls vs. Black boys).

The ethnic differences found were inconsistent with what was expected. Based on the marginality hypothesis (Prentice & Trail, 2010) and prior literature (Corby, Hodges, & Perry, 2007), we would expect ethnic minorities to be more sensitive to their group norms. However, I found that White girls who deviated from other White girls at their school, were more likely to



report feeling lonelier, anxious, and perceive more discrimination from peers based on their gender. Reports of higher levels of gender discrimination was also evident among White boys who deviated from their group norm. It could be that given the ethnic and racial context of urban schools where White girls tend to be in the minority, the norms may become most salient when they are deviating.

Among White youth, gender typicality is generally seen as being more favorable leading to acceptance by peers (Leaper & Smith, 2004; Yunger et al., 2004) supporting my findings that feelings of gender atypicality are related to more perceived gender-based discrimination by peers and experiencing negative psychological outcomes of loneliness and anxiety. To my knowledge, prior studies have not examined the extent to which youth deviate from their own ethnic and gender group norms. However, Corby and colleagues (2007) did find associations of gender identity with adjustment varying by ethnicity/race. Specifically, they found that Hispanic and Black children experienced greater pressure to conform to gender norms than White children. This is inconsistent with the current findings so it can be argued that the relationship between gender atypicality and loneliness, anxiety, and gender discrimination may be related to a greater degree of felt pressure to conform to gender norms for White youth within urban schools. It will be important for future studies to include assessment of youths' felt pressure to conform.

Additionally, the findings for boys indicated that while Asian boys who deviated more from their ethnic and gender group norms at their school, and particularly felt more atypical, reported feeling lonelier; a similar pattern of finding was observed to be marginally true for White boys as well. For Black boys, however, deviating from other same-race boys was related to feeling less anxiety and lower perceived gender discrimination. These unexpected findings may relate in part to stereotypes about masculinity in Black males. The prototypic Black male is

often perceived as aggressive, even by adolescents of different racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Ghavami & Peplau, 2017). Distancing themselves from the gender norms about typical behavior in their racial group may have helped these boys cope with their worry about confirming these stereotypes.

These findings show that there is a complex story for adolescent youth who are most vulnerable given their feelings of gender atypicality. Research on gender atypicality and overall gender identity in adolescence has flourished over the last decade. Despite this added attention, much of this work has treated gender as an isolated construct, unconnected to other identities adolescents carry with them to this new period of development. This study expands current understandings of self-perceived gender atypicality by (a) examining ethnic and gender differences and (b) studying the impact of perceived gender atypicality using one's ethnic and gender group as the norm (GAD).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are notable strengths and limitations to my study. First, my findings are cross sectional in nature, therefore, I cannot make conclusions about the directionality of gender atypicality leading to negative psychosocial outcomes. Second, the measures used in this study were not truly intersectional in nature because the survey items did not ask youth directly about whether they felt dissimilar to other kids of their gender and ethnic group. Rather, I employed intersectionality at the methodological level by examining interactions with ethnicity and gender as well as with using GAD.

Additionally, my study only measured one-gender typicality so I cannot make conclusions about youth who may feel similar to both boys and girls. Therefore, it is unclear whether some youth had less negative outcomes because they have strong own-gender identity or

because other youth benefit from flexibility due to feeling similar to both genders. Similarly, I was unable to test specifically how the school norms are shaped. In order to address these questions, future research will need to examine school-level variables to test if schools inadvertently promote ethnic group segregation and, therefore, provide reason for gender group norms to be unique for each ethnic group. Future research should also examine how being a part of the numerical majority or minority in schools impacts the relationship between feelings of gender atypicality and negative psychosocial outcomes. Examination of the school ethnic context would provide a further specific analysis of the function power differentiations play in group interactions, consistent with an intersectionality framework.

Lastly, the complex and multidimensional nature of gender also underscores the importance of considering how identities other than ethnicity intersect with gender in complex ways. Specifically, an intersectionality framework suggests ways in which other identities, including social class, age, ability, peer status, etc. also intersect with gender and ethnicity to provide an array of gender experiences (Keener, 2015; Lips 2006). Future research should examine the impact of multiple intersecting identities, especially as social class and age intersect with gender and ethnicity to impact gender atypicality.

### **Conclusion**

Girls appear to be more susceptible to group norms than boys and there are ethnic differences on how atypicality is related to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and gender discrimination. All participants in the current study sample who reported feeling more atypical, especially when compared to other youth of their own ethnic and gender group, reported greater levels of bullying. These findings provide several clues for interventions. Specifically, rather than just targeting main effects, interventions should attend to the specific populations rather

than across ethnic and gender groups. Most socializing agents, including parents, teachers, and peers, should not try to make kids more gender typical, as this would simply make them feel more pressure for gender conformity which has been linked to even worse outcomes (Menon, et al., 2017). Instead, a better remedy would be to alleviate the pressures that youth feel to conform to their gender group and allow for flexibility. Overall, prevention and intervention strategies that focus on impacting youth's psychological and social well-being are invaluable to all children and should be a key focus of educators and other socializing agents.

Table 1.1

*Descriptive Statistics (N = 3788)*

Variable Name	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Dependent Variables		
Loneliness ( <i>n</i> = 2,285)	1.58	0.74
Social anxiety ( <i>n</i> = 3,511)	2.15	0.74
Peer victimization ( <i>n</i> = 3,434)	1.99	0.79
Gender discrimination ( <i>n</i> = 3,538)	1.19	0.40
Independent Variables		
Gender atypicality ( <i>n</i> = 3,508)	2.56	0.93
Gender-atypicality-deviation ( <i>n</i> = 3,408)	-.37	0.95
Gender (%)		
Boys	49	—
Girls	51	—
Ethnicity (%)		
Latinx	44	—
African American/Black	12	—
East/Southeast Asian	18	—
White	26	—
Covariates		
Parent level of education ( <i>n</i> = 3,259)	3.82	1.63
Pubertal development ( <i>n</i> = 3,409)	3.10	0.91

*Note.* Range of scores for the dependent variables is 1–5; range for gender atypicality is 1–3; range for gender-atypicality-deviation is -2.46–2.40; range for parent level of education is 1–6; range for pubertal development is 1–5.

Table 1.2  
*Correlations for Predictors, Outcomes, Moderators, and Covariates*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender atypicality	1									
2. Gender-Atypicality-Deviation	.98**	1								
3. Loneliness	.31**	.29**	1							
4. Anxiety	.20**	.18**	.52**	1						
5. Victimization	.21**	.21**	.22**	.22**	1					
6. Gender-based discrimination	.19**	.18**	.27**	.20**	.22**	1				
7. Gender	.14**	.12**	-.02	.07**	.04**	-.10**	1			
8. Ethnicity	.01	.02	-.04*	-.02	.10**	-.01	-.02	1		
9. Parent level of education	-.03	-.03	.06**	.02	.18**	.02	.05**	.38**	1	
10. Pubertal development	-.02	-.01	.07**	.10**	.03	-.02	.13**	.011	-.04*	1

Note. \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01.

Table 2

*Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) for Gender Atypicality Predicting Psychosocial Outcomes for girls and boys.*

Variable	Loneliness		Social Anxiety		Victimization		Gender discrimination	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Gender atypicality	0.20** (0.03)	0.18** (0.03)	0.18** (0.03)	0.09** (0.03)	0.17** (0.03)	0.14** (0.03)	0.07** (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)
African American X gender atypicality	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.07)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.10+ (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.06+ (0.03)
East/SE Asian X gender atypicality	0.11 (0.07)	0.25** (0.07)	0.74 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.15* (0.07)	0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
White X gender atypicality	0.18** (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.10* (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06** (0.03)	0.05** (0.02)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.14	.12	0.09	0.13	0.11	0.05	0.05

\*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05, +*p* < .06

Table 3

*Results of Analyses Assessing Gender-Atypicality-Deviation Predicting Psychosocial Outcomes for GIRLS*

Variable	Loneliness		Social Anxiety		Victimization		Gender discrimination	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Gender atypicality	0.18**	0.03	0.17**	0.03	0.17**	0.03	0.07**	0.02
African American X gender atypicality	-0.01	0.07	-0.06	0.06	-0.03	0.06	0.10	0.03
East/SE Asian X gender atypicality	0.14+	0.07	0.10	0.06	0.12	0.06	0.01	0.03
White X gender atypicality	0.20**	0.06	0.93+	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.06*	0.03
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.15		0.11		0.13		0.06	

\*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05, +*p* < .06



Table 4

*Results of Analyses Assessing Gender-Atypicality-Deviation Predicting Psychosocial Outcomes for BOYS*

Variable	Loneliness		Social Anxiety		Victimization		Gender discrimination	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Gender atypicality	0.17**	0.04	0.08**	0.03	0.14**	0.03	0.05**	0.02
African American X gender atypicality	-0.08	0.07	-0.12*	0.06	-0.07	0.07	-0.06*	0.03
Asian American X gender atypicality	0.24**	0.08	0.08	0.06	0.11	0.07	0.02	0.03
White X gender atypicality	0.11+	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.06*	0.02
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.14		0.09		0.11		0.04	

\*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05, +*p* < .06

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