

From Formal Equality to Substantive Pluralism: An Analysis of the Paradigm Shift in Contemporary Youth Gender Cognition

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Abstract. Modern young people are growing increasingly dissatisfied with formal equality, which treats gender and sexual orientation equally while ignoring inherent differences between groups. Instead, they are shifting to a substantive pluralistic paradigm that recognizes and addresses such differences. Based on intersectionality theory, minority stress theory, and the social ecological model, this study conducts a theoretical synthesis and cross-regional comparative analysis of legal norms, social norms, and youth practices in different institutional contexts. The findings reveal that formal equality tends to conceal structural discrimination through gender blindness and legal silence, and it may erase non-normative identities. In contrast, substantive pluralism can directly relieve proximal stress and realize genuine identity recognition and affirmation. The conclusion emphasizes that the cognitive transformation of the youth group has outpaced institutional changes. In the future, coordinated governance should be promoted from the perspectives of law, education, and social norms, replacing the neglect of differences with the recognition of differences.

Keywords: formal equality, substantive pluralism, youth gender cognition, legal silence

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, formal equality (treating everyone the same no matter their gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression) has been the main framework for anti-discrimination policies. It has done well in stopping obvious job discrimination and expanding voting rights, but it is not enough to bring truly fair results. On one hand, McConnell and others found that when everyday social norms clash with legal rules, the fact that people follow the law does not always lead to the hoped-for social change [1]. On the other hand, Li and others found that 68.3% of transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse teenagers in China have clear gender anxiety and serious mental health problems, which directly shows that systems ignoring group differences have flaws [2].

This study fills two gaps. First, few studies have treated substantive pluralism (substantive equality that centers on recognizing differences) as a separate way of thinking. Second, existing research has not put together the multi-level mechanisms of the big legal environment, middle-level community practices, and small-level personal identity formation. To do this, the study uses three connected theoretical frameworks (intersectionality, minority stress, and the social ecology model),

using theoretical analysis and cross-regional comparisons to look at eleven key works from both Western and Chinese backgrounds.

This study first traces the theoretical shift from formal equality to substantive pluralism, then analyzes the limits of formal equality (such as gender blindness and young people's disappointment with rigid political correctness). Next, this research discusses practical paths through three angles: symbolic recognition, economic rewards, and informal support networks. After that, this study compares Region A (China) with Region B (the European Union (EU), Canada, and Australia). Finally, the study summarizes the findings and gives policy suggestions.

The goal is to define this shift as a fundamental change in how people think about gender, to explain the working mechanisms of substantive pluralism across several dimensions, and to show the barriers that block this shift. The study's value is that it combines legal critiques, social frameworks, and real-world evidence. In practice, it offers a new way to understand changes in young people's gender thinking and helps push forward gender equality education and policy-making.

2. Theoretical mapping: the sociological logic from equality to diversity

2.1. Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality theory posits that an individual's identity is multidimensional--race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and body image intertwine to produce irreducible, unique experiences of oppression. In their in-depth interviews with 33 young cisgender sexual minority men in Chicago, McConnell found that Black participants experienced hypervigilance in white neighborhoods, a response that diminished when they were perceived as queer. Latino participants said they were seen as hot Latin lovers, while white participants felt that being white did not matter much [1]. These examples show that a single-angle equality framework (like only focusing on sexual orientation) cannot fix the multiple weaknesses of sexual minority victims. The colorblind kind of formal equality hides the unique stress from the mix of race and sexual orientation. McIntyre pointed out that anti-political correctness movements attack feminism, anti-racism, and gay rights together, which shows these inequalities are tied together [3]. Therefore, moving from formal equality to real diversity needs a cross-cutting view.

2.2. Minority stress theory

The minority stress theory divides stressors into outer types (bad family relationships, social discrimination) and inner types (internalized fear of being transgender, self-identity struggles). Li and others studied gender-diverse teenagers in China and found that serious gender anxiety links to depression, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm [2]. Family relationships (especially with fathers) stood out as key factors. Formal equality can handle obvious outer discrimination (like laws against firing transgender employees), but it does almost nothing for inner stressors like self-hatred from gender anxiety. A real diversity framework that affirms gender differences can directly ease this inner stress, because the person no longer needs to feel shame or fear.

Lalonde and others added that people with traditional gender views often see political correctness as overdone and repressive, reflecting their fear that their privilege might be challenged [4]. Therefore, minority stress also shapes how the majority group resists equality.

2.3. Social ecological model

The social ecology model says a person's actions come from the interplay of micro (personal mind), middle (community, family), and macro (national policy) levels. Wang and Bao showed this clearly in China's digital platform economy [5]. At the macro level, the state used a moral panic about sissy culture to justify anti-monopoly actions. At the middle level, social media and fan groups made the debate bigger. At the micro level, male idols' clothing and fan comment controls became a battlefield. Li and others also showed the interplay of individual factors (gender anxiety), relationship factors (family bonds), and community factors (father's education level) [2]. Changing how people think is not just updating personal beliefs but an ongoing process of negotiation and conflict between social layers.

3. The limitations of formal equality: obscured differences and risks

3.1. The trap of gender blindness

Gender blindness is the core operating logic of formal equality: pretending that differences do not exist and assuming that treating everyone the same will achieve fairness. Yet in practice, this narrative often serves to conceal structural discrimination. In McConnell, one participant, Anthony, said race does not matter, but then went on to describe experiences of racial discrimination, a contradiction that shows how hollow equality rhetoric has become for young people who have personally experienced discrimination [1].

An even more extreme case comes from Wang and Bao [5]. In China, sissy men have been publicly criticized by state media and official policies, and associated with pathological aesthetics and national security. Formal equality would say, All men are the same, whether masculine or feminine. In reality, however, non-normative differences are not treated equally; they are actively stigmatized and governed. McIntyre sharply notes that the anti-political correctness movement's claim--racial/gender discrimination is over, and all that is needed now is individual effort--completely ignores the persistent impact of structural discrimination [3]. Formal equality thus becomes an ideology that preserves the status quo: by pretending that differences do not exist, it evades the responsibility of changing power structures.

3.2. The cost of legal silence

When a legal system provides only universal equality, sexual minorities face obstacles in investigations, evidence collection, and legal redress because their identities are not recognized by legal language. Lample analyzed the trial of the Toronto women's bathhouse raid [6]. The defense lawyer asked detailed questions about the defendants' clothing and bodily exposure; police described genital rubbing and bulging underwear--the bodies of lesbians and transgender people were, in fact, highly visible. Yet the judge's final decision did not contain a single word such as lesbian, queer, or transgender. This means that anyone searching for this case in the future will not be able to find it using those terms. Legal precedents cannot accumulate, and the problem is systematically rendered invisible [6, 7].

Li Yan offers a similar analysis from the perspective of Chinese law [8]. The law's wholesale adoption of the medical binary gender paradigm has created difficulties for intersex individuals in areas such as human trafficking offenses, rape law (which limits victims to women), and gender-segregated public facilities. If a person's gender cannot be legally classified as male or female, do

they enjoy the relevant rights? The cost of legal silence is not only a lack of remedies but also a denial of the very existence of non-normative subjects.

4. Empirical analysis: pathways to constructing substantive diversity

4.1. Symbolic identity and cultural breakthroughs

Social media has profoundly reshaped young people's thresholds for gender expression. Wang and Bao found that young fan communities actively challenge traditional masculine norms by supporting idols with effeminate styles [5]. Meanwhile, the growing trend among youth to proactively use and ask for gender pronouns (for example, asking others to use they/them pronouns) represents a complete reversal of the legal active ignorance identified by Lamble [6]. It is a substantive, pluralistic practice that demands to be seen and correctly identified [7, 9].

4.2. The driving force of economic value

Diverse gender identities have become a driving force in the platform economy. Wang and Bao's concept of sissy capital reveals that the state's coupling of sissy culture with the disorderly expansion of capital actually proves that the economic influence of gender diversity can no longer be ignored [5]. Economic interests are a powerful engine pushing social cognition from formal equality toward substantive diversity.

4.3. The role of informal support networks

In the absence of formal legal protections, sexual minority youth rely heavily on informal support networks. Li point out that family harmony and relationships with parents are key determinants of mental health [2]. McConnell found that young people achieve cognitive evolution outside institutional frameworks by sharing experiences and mutually recognizing identities within their communities [1].

5. Cross-regional comparison: how institutional contexts constrain or promote cognitive transformation

5.1. Practice in Region A: cognitive evolution within informal support networks

Region A (typically represented by China) has not yet established a comprehensive anti-discrimination legal framework for sexual minorities; gender change often requires completion of sex reassignment surgery [9]. In this institutional environment, the cognitive evolution of young people depends mainly on informal support networks. Li's directed acyclic graph (DAG) analysis shows that a poor relationship with the father predicts poor family harmony, which in turn activates significant gender dysphoria and ultimately leads to depression and non-suicidal self-injury, underscoring the critical role of the family as an informal system [2]. Meanwhile, the multiple vulnerabilities of rural young women in health, education, employment, and marriage further illustrate how differentiated vulnerabilities are exacerbated when institutional support is weak [10].

Nevertheless, informal networks also have resilience. McConnell found that young people achieve cognitive evolution outside formal systems by sharing experiences and mutually recognizing identities within their communities [1]. However, this evolution is unstable and unsustainable; it cannot replace legal protections and public services.

5.2. Practice in Region B: a soft landing through the linkage of education and law

Region B (typically some EU countries, Canada, and Australia) recognized gender diversity earlier at the institutional level. McConnell proposed a rational checklist for analyzing social norms prior to legislation: lawmakers should systematically examine the causes of social norms, their sanctioning mechanisms, beneficiary groups, and oppositional capacities, in order to enhance the law's real-world effectiveness [1]. This provides an operational framework for achieving a soft landing. Luo Ying's advocacy of the principle of proportional equality and gender quota systems also represents differentiated support at the institutional level [11]. In Region B, education and law work in tandem: schools implement gender-inclusive education, and the law recognizes a third gender. Examples include the X gender marker on Australian passports and third-gender ID cards in Nepal [8]. This provides institutional guarantees for substantive diversity, and the pressure on young people stems more from cultural inertia than from legal denial.

5.3. Analyzing resistance to transformation: cultural resilience and institutional inertia

In both Region A and Region B, cognitive transformation faces profound resistance. Li point out that resistance comes from traditional Confucian family norms and a gender-binary culture [2]. A father's higher education level can be a protective factor, which in turn suggests that lower education levels are often associated with more rigid adherence to traditional gender roles. Blanco and Kristan reveal that legal rationality itself can be a barrier: the law's relevance filtering and heterosexual presumptions render non-normative subjects unknowable and unthinkable in legal terms [7]. McIntyre notes that right-wing foundations and media systematically obstruct the process of substantive equality by manufacturing culture wars [3]. Comparing the two regions, resistance in Region A arises mainly from the combination of institutional absence and cultural conservatism, whereas resistance in Region B manifests as a tension between progressive institutions and entrenched social norms. As McConnell emphasize, even a well-designed law will struggle to change reality if social norms pull in the opposite direction [1].

6. Policy and path recommendation: from cognitive transformation to institutional response

Contemporary youth's gender cognitive transformation has outpaced institutional progress, and their bottom-up pursuit of substantive pluralism requires targeted institutional support. Based on existing research, this chapter puts forward targeted policy recommendations from four dimensions to bridge the gap between youth cognition and institutional arrangements.

6.1. Legislative level: acknowledge differences and eliminate legal silence

China should legally recognize the third gender identity and gender self-determination right, referring to international practices to add a third gender option in official documents, and abolish the gender reassignment surgery prerequisite for gender marker modification. Meanwhile, gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation should be included in anti-discrimination laws, with dedicated relief channels established. A systematic social norm assessment should be conducted before legislation to improve the actual effect of laws.

6.2. Educational level: promote gender-inclusive education system

Gender-inclusive curricula covering gender diversity and anti-stereotyping should be offered at all school stages. Targeted training should be provided for teachers and counselors to avoid stigmatizing expressions and offer professional psychological support for gender minority youth. Schools also need to support peer support groups like Gender-Sexuality Alliances to boost grassroots cognitive progress.

6.3. Social services and public policy: build comprehensive support networks

The government should fund community support centers to provide psychological, legal, and vocational services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual minority (LGBTQ+) groups, and include gender dysphoria treatment in medical insurance. Workplaces and medical institutions should promote gender inclusiveness, eliminate structural employment barriers, and abandon pathologizing labels for transgender groups. Discriminatory functions on social platforms should be regulated via legislation and industry self-regulation.

6.4. Cultural governance: realize diversity-oriented narrative transformation

Media should avoid stigmatizing non-normative gender identities and follow inclusive reporting guidelines. Youth-led gender-equitable cultural creation should be supported, and mainstream cultural works should promote diverse gender images. Facing transformational resistance, a de-escalation strategy should be adopted to link substantive pluralism with mainstream social values, reducing unnecessary cultural conflicts.

7. Conclusion

This study focuses on the gender cognitive paradigm shift of contemporary youth, exploring the transition from formal equality to substantive pluralism. Core findings show that formal equality has structural flaws: its gender-blind logic masks structural discrimination, legal silence marginalizes sexual minorities, and it fails to respond to youth's real gender-related experiences, leading to public disillusionment with rigid political correctness.

Substantive pluralism, supported by intersectionality, minority stress, and social ecological theories, constitutes a more inclusive equality paradigm, which can directly relieve the psychological stress of gender minority groups by affirming individual differences. Youth are the pioneers of this cognitive transformation, promoting pluralistic practices via symbolic identification, economic actions, and informal support networks, yet such practices are unstable due to insufficient institutional support.

Cross-regional comparison further indicates that institutional environments determine transformation paths: Region A (China) faces resistance from institutional gaps and cultural conservatism, while Region B (EU, Australia, Canada) confronts tensions between progressive institutions and conservative social norms. Cross-sectoral institutional coordination is the key to breakthroughs.

The study makes three theoretical contributions: it defines substantive pluralism as an independent cognitive paradigm; it builds an interdisciplinary multi-level analytical framework linking individual psychology, community practices, and macro institutions; and it avoids Western centralism via cross-regional analysis, clarifying institutional impacts on cognitive transformation.

This study only uses theory and written materials, without any first-hand real-world data. It also only looks at gender and sexual orientation, ignoring other overlapping identities. It does not break down the differences within Region B either. Future studies could use mixed research methods, add class and age to the analysis, and carry out targeted case studies of single countries.

Young people's gender thinking has changed faster than the development of institutions; they seek true equality that recognizes differences, not just surface formal equality. This shift challenges unfair social structures, not only cultural preferences. In a time when gender equality is facing a global setback, pushing the move toward true pluralism by improving institutions is not only a requirement of social justice, but also a necessary condition for society to keep developing in a healthy way.

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