

Gender and the Senses of Agency

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**Abstract**

This paper details the ways that gender structures our senses of agency on an enactive framework. While it is common to discuss how gender influences higher, narrative levels of cognition, as with the formulation of goals and in considerations about our identities, it is less clear how gender structures our more immediate, embodied processes, such as the minimal sense of agency. While enactivists often acknowledge *that* gender and other aspects of our socio-cultural situatedness shape our cognitive processes, there is little work on *how* this shaping takes place. In order to provide such an account, I will first look at the minimal and narrative senses of agency (Gallagher 2012), a distinction that draws from work on minimal and narrative selves (Zahavi 2010). Next I will explain the influence of the narrative sense of agency on the minimal sense of agency through work on intention-formation (Pacherie 2007). After a discussion of the role of gender in the narrative sense of agency, I'll expand on work by Haslanger (2012) and Young (1980) to offer three ways in which gender influences the minimal sense of agency, showing the effect that gender has on how we perceive our possibilities for interaction in a phenomenologically immediate, pre-reflective manner.

**Keywords**

agency, philosophy of action, enactivism, embodied cognition, feminist philosophy of mind

**Introduction**

Gender plays an extensive role in influencing the way we are treated, what others expect of us, and how we think of ourselves. It is likely to be seen as uncontentious, then, to claim that gender influences our sense of agency in some significant sense. However, there is an ambiguity between the different senses of agency (Gallagher 2012); this ambiguity can be thought of as existing between our *narrative*, or reflective, sense of agency and our *minimal*, or immediately

embodied, sense of agency, tied, for example, to motor control processes. While it is common to discuss how gender influences higher, narrative levels of cognition, as with the formulation of goals and in considerations about our social identities, it is less clear whether, or how, gender could have a pronounced effect on our minimal sense of agency. The arguments provided in this paper will demonstrate the effect that gender has on how we perceive our possibilities for interaction in a phenomenologically immediate, pre-reflective manner.

Through an analysis of the effects of gender on our intentions and senses of agency, I will show that gender does more than factor into our cognitive deliberations and become manifest in our bodily comportment; gender structures our experience in very phenomenologically fundamental ways. Rather than positing basic, universal cognitive processes which give a phenomenological core to experience which is untouched by gender, race, or other particularities of a person's identity or situatedness, repeated patterns of behavior mediated by socioculturally situated social norms give rise to differences in even our most minimal cognitive processes. The arguments provided thus are a means to opening a dialogue about how gender norms create differences in experience without either making any claims about essential, or hard-wired, differences, nor by positing a phenomenological neutral subjectivity from which gender deviates us (or, more problematically, which we should be seeking to achieve).

The paper will proceed as follows: First, I will discuss the differences between two senses of agency: the minimal sense of agency and the narrative sense of agency (Marcel 2003; Gallagher 2012), which roughly correspond to minimal and narrative selves (Gallagher 2000, Zahavi 2010). Next I will explain the influence of the narrative sense of agency on the minimal sense of agency through work on intention-formation (Pacherie 2008). After a discussion of the role of gender in forming high-level intentions, I'll offer three ways in which gender can be said to influence the minimal sense of agency.

## **I. Senses of Agency and Intention Formation**

The relationships between action, perception, and the senses of agency are so tightly knit that we can only make sense of the senses of agency by looking at them together. First, it will be important to explain the distinction between two senses of agency, and further, the action-related nature of the minimal sense of agency. That is, in the latter case, I am concerned with our sense of agency as the feeling that one is the source or cause of one's own actions in an "occurrent and immersed" sense (Marcel 2003). In phenomenological terms, this kind of agency can be thought of as pre-reflective. One generally does not need to assess whether one is exercising agency; there is, in most cases, no need for introspection to assess whether one is the source of one's own actions while engaged in those actions (Gallagher 2000, 2012). As Farrer and Frith say, "The sense of agency (i.e. being aware of causing an action) occurs in the context of a body moving in time and space." (2002, pg. 601). This phenomenological, immediate sense of agency is said to be an aspect of the minimal self, or the self as the basic subject of experience (Gallagher 2000, Zahavi 2010). Following Marcel, I will call this the *minimal sense of agency* (2003).

We ought to understand the minimal sense of agency as phenomenologically primitive. The minimal sense of agency is an aspect of the *minimal sense of self*, given through immediate experience, since the fundamental nature of phenomenological experience is that it is always experience-for-a-subject (Gallagher 2000). The minimal self is this subject, given in experience,

who is always in the process of soliciting her *own* further experiences through action.<sup>1</sup> Evaluating the influence of gender on the minimal sense of agency thus requires that we look at its influence on the embodied perception-action complex within which the phenomenological sense of agency arises.

In the tradition of Merleau-Ponty (2012), Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), Gallagher and Zahavi (2012), and others who hold that the body is more than a vehicle for the brain, I will argue here that our minimal sense of agency can be understood as neither separate from the body, nor decoupled from the environment. Cognition is a thoroughly relational and action-oriented dynamic process involving an organism's brain, body, and environment. In looking at the senses of agency, then, we have to consider that this minimal sense plays a role in an organism's embodied capability to interact with her environment, where embodiment is understood "in terms of wide-reaching organismic sensorimotor interactions that are contextually embedded" (Hutto and Myin, 2012, p. 6). Embodiment, then, is relational; the body itself discloses possibilities for interaction through its particular morphology (e. g. hands can grasp, eyes can peer, and so on) and the environmental context in which it is embedded (e.g. there is a cup for grasping, a night sky to gaze upon, and so on). The environment dynamically discloses its possibilities for interaction, or affordances (Gibson 1979, Chemero 2009, Kiverstein and Rietveld 2015), in relation with an organism with certain capacities to act. For the organism, not only is perception for action (Noë 2005), but action is for perception.

The dynamic interchange between the subject's embodied organism and her environment, patterned and primed by previous exchanges, changes the saliency of environmental possibilities for interaction based on her previous interactions. In other words, our actions in each moment, and our experience of those actions, influence the way that new possibilities for interaction unfold. The possibilities for interaction given to us through our bodily capacities and previous interactions, as well as our habits of coupling and their success, provide an embodied know-how that is manifest in perception and the way we perceive affordances for future actions (Kiverstein and Rietveld 2015).

There exists a long-standing tradition in the philosophy of action of looking at agency as the fulfillment of a certain causal sequence between an intention (or reason) and an action (Goldman 1970, Davidson 1980). In these cases, a functional account is given for linking the content of the action's goal and the action itself. Cognitivist approaches to agency thus tend to characterize the sense of agency in terms of a kind of *knowledge* of oneself or one's mental state as the causal source of action (Velleman 1989). Much of the literature on action and agency outside of the fields of ecological psychology and enactivism have thus been concerned with how to best describe the causal relations between reasons for acting (as propositional attitudes) and the actions themselves. That is, they have sought to best explain the received assumption that there is a robust relationship between an agent's reasons for acting—in the sense of having a propositional attitude—and her action.

However, this view of agency seems to necessitate the extra steps of evaluation and

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<sup>1</sup> It seems prudent to note that this is not always the case. There is plenty of work on pathologies and traumas related to agency, selfhood, and a sense of ownership (for example, see Yochai 2015, Gallagher 2015, Gallagher & Trigg 2016). Still, most cases involve interruptions in agency and ownership, not a complete lack. Therefore, much of what will be developed later about the influence of gender will still be applicable.

attribution not required in the dynamic, agency-in-action view. The minimal sense of agency, as discussed above, should be considered the phenomenological side of a collection of interdependent, co-constitutive, nested processes that are temporally and spatially extensive. On this view, minimal agency is not necessarily causally guided by conceptual content. As described by Gallagher and Zahavi, “The first-order experiences of ownership and agency are embodied, non-conceptual experiences, and are closely tied to the temporal structure of consciousness. For example, if I reach to pick up a glass, there is information in my motor system that specifies something about the present and immediate history of my hand position, and an anticipation that is built into my movement as my hand shapes its grasp. This temporal structure of movement is mirrored in my sense of control over the movement and so in my sense of self-agency” (2012, p. 180). This describes what is elsewhere called our proprioceptive awareness, or our physical awareness of being the source of our own actions through the sensorimotor feedback we receive while undertaking those actions (Marcel 2003, p. 54).

However, there are many situations in which an agent *does* reflectively evaluate or explain her actions in terms of a broader framework: a belief system, history, prior intentions, future plans, and so forth. That is, she makes sense of her actions in terms of *who* she is as a continuous, coherent being, the kinds of rules or principles that she follows, and with the understanding that in order to achieve a goal in the future, she may have to accomplish many smaller goals at appropriate times. Her actions in these cases are the result of conscious, decision-making processes, and these deliberative processes lead to have a contentful mental state that has a causal link to a particular action or series of actions. There is, expectedly, a phenomenological element here as well; as Stephens and Graham (1994) describe it, making sense of her actions in this way will depend on whether she has the kinds of beliefs and intentions that cohere with the action undertaken in terms of her theory of herself and the kind of person that she is. She appeals in this case to her narrative self, or the self that she understands herself to be, based on her prior actions, belief system, and the way in which she makes sense of herself as a being over time (Schechtman 1996). The sense of agency, in this case, will be in terms of fulfilling this consciously selected goal and initiating the actions needed to reach it. That is, there *is* a conscious causal relationship between some pre-decided, propositional or contentful attitude and an action or series of actions. I will call this the *narrative sense of agency*.

This isn't to say that conscious sense-making of one's actions always appeals to a full evaluation of oneself in a storied sense. However, there is a close connection between a notion of a narrative self and narrative agency, as the same resources used to build the former scaffold the latter. One aspect of the development of this narrative competence involves repeated exposure to narrative archetypes. Through narrative practices involving characters with a coherent story and character traits, we come to understand actions in terms of reason-action coupling (Hutto 2008). We get a sense of why a character performs a certain action based on who they are as a person *over time*.<sup>2</sup> These stories we create for ourselves and share with others about who we are form

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<sup>2</sup> Pacherie (2007) describes this in a similar fashion, noting that, in her parlance, the *long-term sense of agency* “may be thought to include both a sense of oneself as an agent apart from any particular action, i.e. a sense of one's capacity for action over time, and a form of self-narrative where one's past actions and projected future actions are given a general coherence and unified through a set of overarching goals, motivations, projects and general lines of conduct” (p. 6).

our narrative selves, and these competencies allow us to evaluate and attribute propositional, coherent reasons for our actions.

These distinctions between the different senses of agency are not meant to be fine-grained; however, they should serve well enough to provide an understanding of the basic differences between the immediate feeling that we are the source of an action while engaged in that action and the carrying out of actions based on the prior existence of a deliberately selected goal. As I will show presently, each of these can influence the other. Again, quoting Gallagher and Zahavi, “To be human is already to be action-situated in the world in a way that defines the organized usefulness of the things we find around us, and then lets us think about them.” (2012, pg. 189). As applied to the senses of agency, we can also think of this as saying that our minimal sense of agency scaffolds the ability to have a narrative sense of agency. In order to demonstrate this, as well as to emphasize the upstream and downstream relationships between the senses of agency, I will discuss the role of intention-formation processes as related to both senses of agency discussed.

One criticism of the received view of reason-action coupling is that the attribution of reasons for action is a retrospective folk psychological sense-making process (Dennett 1991), meaning that reasons for actions are provided in this way after an action is performed due to our linguistic and cooperative tendencies. However, this kind of attribution of reasons in propositional, or narrative terms, can also have a prospective, or future-directed, aspect (Gallagher 2012). One can deliberate about what she ought to do and form future intentions based on the type of person she believes she is or has been, her related goals and desires, and so forth.

Given the distinctions between the senses of agency, however, it only makes sense to consider that there may be corresponding distinctions between types of intentions. Gallagher has previously made this case (2012), demonstrating that the distinctions between minimal and narrative senses of agency can be mapped on to intention-formation practices as detailed by Pacherie (2007; see also Bratman 1987). Pacherie distinguishes between future, present, and motor intentions (as F-intentions, P-intentions, and M-intentions). F-intentions are those intentions which we decide upon on a conscious, reflective level. These are consciously present to us precisely because they are generally the product of a conscious decision-making process, and their aims transcend what we are immediately able to accomplish. Pacherie describes P-intentions as “constrained by the present spatial as well as non-spatial characteristics of the agent, the target of the action, and the surrounding context” (2007, p. 3). These are the aims of our current actions, constrained spatially and temporally; in other words, they are those things which it is possible to accomplish *presently*. M-intentions are those sub-personal motor processes that allow us to accomplish our goals, or to enact our P-intentions, such as shaping our hand the correct way to grasp a cup or hold a pen. However, these are not (all) so sub-personal that we cannot attend to them; they are just not always a part of our immediate experience of an action.<sup>3</sup>

An F-intention is a decision to pursue a specific task or even a more general goal. For example, getting a university degree is a rather general goal-oriented F-intention that cashes out into a myriad of smaller F-intentions (pass a class, do well on an exam, and so on). A better example might be my plan to take a holiday to Adelaide. The fulfillment of this F-intention requires that I fulfill a number of requirements beforehand (booking travel and rooms, getting

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<sup>3</sup> I thank [removed] and [removed] for insight on linking M-intentions and attention.

approval for my time off, planning my itinerary) and during (getting to the airport, finding my terminal, boarding the plane). Each of these smaller components form P-intentions, and provide a smaller goal to be fulfilled. Booking the flight, for example, requires that I have the right kind of tools, such as my laptop, and time available to me to be able to perform this action. Boarding the plane requires that I be in a particular environment and go through a series of steps (standing in line, navigating the terminal, getting through security, finding my way to my seat) that are only possible because I am in the proper context at the right time to facilitate their completion. Finding and settling into my seat is only an option when I am on the plane. The ability to fulfill this P-intention is reliant on my being in the right spatiotemporal context to allow me to achieve the goal.

We can see from this example that a P-intention can be part of a larger F-intention but directed at accomplishing some small goal in itself. In many cases, these may not occur to me explicitly as intentions. The action of standing in line to go through security, in the previous example, might not be the result of a conscious deliberating process. I have not *decided* to stand in line, it becomes part of a goal-oriented action based on the current spatiotemporal situation. As a frequent traveler, it might not have even occurred to me in a phenomenological sense that I need to get into the line—I simply adapted to the situation pre-reflectively while continuing to think about what I’m going to do when I disembark, or whether or not I have time for a pre-flight cocktail. However, if someone asked me what I was doing in line I could retrospectively provide them with an answer in terms of a reason (“I am waiting to go through security.”).

Drawing on this framework, Gallagher notes that the repetition of P-intentions can lead us to attribute those reasons for action in terms of more deliberate, over-arching F-intentions. Gallagher provides his habit of immediately responding to letter-writing requests as an example of this. He says “over time I built up a habitual practice that seems to guide my behavior in most circumstances. If I am following a rule here, the rule seems to have emerged from my practice, rather than the other way around. I could now formulate that rule as an F-intention, but I would be doing so only in retrospective reflection” (2012, p. 20). While there may not have been a time when he rationalized this rule, he is now in the habit of forming a certain kind of response to requests (P-intention) which, if asked why, he would describe in terms of a belief about how he ought to respond to these requests (F-intention). The F-intention did not lead to P-intentions; engaging in a particular kind of P-intention repeatedly led to the formulation of an F-intention (as a rule guiding his behaviors).

Gallagher’s example highlights that not only can F-intentions (as goals or rules) be fulfilled by a series of P-intentions, but that a series of separate P-intentions can lead to the reflective formulation of an F-intention. This complicates the distinctions and relationship between types of intentions, and he argues that these complications should be brought to bear on our understanding of the senses of agency. However, Gallagher’s example is explicit enough that the P-intentions in that case might be thought of as a result of a deliberation process. Perhaps he briefly deliberated a few separate times when presented with a recommendation request, and that series of separate deliberation processes led to the later formulation of an overarching F-intention.

This brings up an important issue: for Pacherie, the goals of P-intentions are contentful representations. She marks the distinction between P- and M-intentions in this regard as follows: “In contrast to M-intentions, P-intentions specify our situated goals and represent them in a perceptual representational format readily accessible to consciousness. Through them we can be aware of what our immediate goals are” (2007, p. 196) and, again, “I therefore propose to say

that an action in the minimal sense is an intentional movement, and consists of two parts: the bodily movement itself and the M-intention that causes and guides this movement. An intentional action in turn also consists in two parts: an action or intentional movement, understood in the sense just outlined, and the P-intention that causes and guides it” (2007 p. 190). My concern here is that this seems to lead us to a Euthyphro dilemma: is an action intentional because it is caused by a P-intention, or do we posit the existence of a causally relevant P-intention because the action is intentional? In other words, what necessitates the existence of a contentful representation to guide the action in order for this to be the defining feature of an intentional action?

This concern may be more pronounced if we look at Pacherie’s explanation of how our phenomenological experience maps onto these intentions. As she says, “our awareness of our movements rests for the most part on our awareness of the predictions made at the level of P-intentions and on the comparison between these predictions and consciously available exteroceptive feedback. When the action unfolds smoothly, this awareness is typically extremely limited. Action specification and action control mechanisms at the level of M-intentions operate automatically and remain outside the subject’s subjective experience” (2007 p. 201). For Pacherie, then, M-intentions are outside of the phenomenological sphere of experience, or conscious attention, while P-intentions involve explicit phenomenological attention to a goal. As she puts it, “Forming a P-intention to act on an object, say reach for a pen, typically involves focusing one’s attention on the object that is to be the target of the action” (2007, p. 186-7). That is, the goal to be accomplished in the current context is present to us in a robust, contentful sense.

I don’t intend to dispute that P-intentions can be contentful, especially in the case that they are connected to an F-intention. In fact, this seems highly appropriate. However, I’d also like to entertain the possibility that there can be non-contentful P-intentions that are available to us in phenomenological immediacy. These could be the products of joint attentional practices (where there has been external guidance on what actions to perform or how to perform them in certain contexts), behavioral corrections (where there has been external guidance on what actions not to perform or how not to perform them in certain contexts), or simply individual patterns of engagement that lead to habits of response. These would fall into a grey area between Pacherie’s intentional movements and intentional actions using the contentful criteria, but the phenomenological criteria would place these into the realm of P-intentions, as they are not outside of subjective experience, nor are their aims necessarily contentful in any robust sense. These are the purposeful actions, in the minimal sense of agency, in which we find ourselves attentively immersed but that lack any prior goal-formulation process. Further, these kinds of intentional actions, which I would consider to be P-intentions, can also lead to the formulation of an F-intention at a later time, such as in Gallagher’s example.

Most relevant to the following discussion of the influence of gender is the question of how aware we are of the rules that govern our behavior, or if these can be really even said to be rules before we have brought our habits into the realm of conscious consideration. We often purposefully attend to features in our current environment and, over time, the way in which we attend to these can lead us to reflectively attribute a guiding rule, or F-intention, that was not contentful at the time. Put simply, we may not be aware that we are following a particular rule until we have been following it – the rule can emerge from behavior (Gallagher 2012) – and the formulation of this rule is often removed from the previous contexts in which it was enacted.

This section has served to establish a framework for understanding how our minimal and

narrative selves give rise to minimal and narrative senses of agency. In addition, these senses of agency can be mapped on to intention-formation processes. Problematic, however, is the mismatch between the criteria of content for P-intentions and the phenomenological experience of our purposeful actions in a pre-reflective, occurrent sense. To this, I have argued that the criteria for establishing that an action is intentional should also take into account the phenomenological experience in our minimal sense of agency, especially in the case that a P-intention is not connected to an F-intention. I have also argued that these kinds of P-intentions can also later be formulated into F-intentions, regardless of whether or not they were robustly contentful at the time of action. The point I will make in the following section is that this rule-emergence from habituation provides one avenue for understanding the influence of gender on our sense of narrative agency, and in the final section, on our minimal sense of agency.

## **II. Gender and the Narrative Sense of Agency**

Philosophical debates on how best to describe gender involve a range of aspects, from gender performance (Butler 1990) to the possession or assumed possession of certain capacities (Alcoff 2006) to the functional essence that defines our social identity (Witt 2011). In other words, there is little agreement on what gender is or how to best understand the associated social norms and expectations. For the purposes of this paper I will be using gender to refer to an associated and loosely unified set of socio-cultural norms, roles, and expectations historically organized around presumptions related to a sex binary. This in no way suggests that any claims about the role of gender in cognition imply that all who identify with a gender are affected in the same way, nor that all individuals identify with a gender category. Further, the account developed below purposefully rejects any claims of innate biological differences in cognitive capacities. However, I think it would be amiss to say that there are those for whom gender (under the broad definition given) has not had an impact on their lived experience.

Sally Haslanger (2012) gives a brief account of how it is that gender (and other social norms) provide us with schemas through which we make sense of the world. In her words:

“Let’s take schemas to be intersubjective patterns of perception, thought, and behavior. They are embodied in individuals as a shared cluster of open-ended dispositions to see things a certain way or to respond habitually in particular circumstances. Schemas encode knowledge and also provide scripts for interaction with each other and our environment. They also exist at different depths. Deep schemas are pervasive and relatively unconscious. Surface schemas are more narrow and are easier to identify and change; but their change may leave the deeper schema intact.” (2012, p. 415)

Given the enactive understanding of cognition, detailed above, Haslanger’s (2012) work on gender norms provides a good starting point for understanding how it is that these gender norms might situate cognition, specifically our senses of agency. While Haslanger uses this account of schemas to make a case about contexts and truth-evaluability (what she calls “milieu relativism”), there are some aspects which the enactive account is well positioned to develop further.

As she describes them, gender norms result from divisions of labor and kinds of activities in virtue of one’s body type. Social roles, structured by these divisions, provide a (rough) set of associated norms and traits. Another way to put this would be to say that a society’s gender roles



provide a normative means of assessing ourselves in light of the functional social role via specific gender norms (Haslanger 2012, p. 42).

To be clear, however, Haslanger maintains that gender norms stem from subordinative or hierarchical relationships. That is, gender, at least in the sense in which it is used now (in contemporary Western society), is used as a means of domination. Gender has been used to maintain oppressive, hierarchical institutions through which free labor is secured and reproductive autonomy denied. It is to the benefit of the dominant gender group that our social structures encourage us to see ourselves as having a gender identity and to make sense of ourselves, explicitly or implicitly, in accordance with gender norms.

One approach to understanding the impact of gender and other social norms is to look deeper at the narrative practices mentioned in the previous section, specifically as they relate to the creation of a narrative self. Beginning very early, we are repeatedly exposed to narrative archetypes as we are developing social and sense-making competencies. These archetypes, characters with a coherent story and strong personas, help us to develop an understanding of why a character performs a certain action based on their character traits. In a society with pronounced gender differences, narrative archetypes tend to reinforce the traits associated with gender norms. For example, until recently in Euro-centric cultures some of the dominant general narrative archetypes for women have been the temptress, the virgin, the mother, and the sage (and these archetypes remain deeply entrenched). As Haslanger states, “if females are expected to perform the role of mothering and to perform it well, then rather than coerce them to fulfill this role, it is much better for females to be motivated to perform it. So the norms must be internalized, that is, they must be understood as part of one’s identity and defining what would count as one’s success as an individual” (Haslanger 2012, p.10). Making sense of oneself through the gender archetypes provided, or the internalization of these archetypes to form the basis through which one understands her narrative self, means that the way in which one makes sense of her actions and formulates goals in line with her identity are in ways that perpetuate her oppression. Assessing whether these structures of oppression are fundamental to understanding gender, as Haslanger and others (see also Antony 2016) hold, is beyond what can be accomplished here. It is enough to say that they presently continue to sustain these and other injustices.

The centrality of gender in building one’s narrative self cannot be understated. Charlotte Witt (2011) has argued that because of the fundamental ways in which societies divide the social functions of individuals along gender lines, gender provides the principle of normative unity, or the basis of an individual’s social identity. However, where Witt thinks that the social identity can in some ways be separated from the person (understood as a narrative self), so that self-understanding does not need to be fundamentally gendered, it is not clear how acquainted we must be with these norms in order to achieve such a separation. Several concerns arise here: how contentful are gender norms, how able are we to access them, and is this in conflict with the issues of internalization discussed above? My position is that one does not have to attend to gender norms in an explicit or even implicit sense for gender to be central in shaping or understanding our narrative selves.

Pacherie’s analysis of the formation of F-intentions includes a discussion of consistency that can be helpful in illuminating the relationship between gender, narrative selves, and the narrative sense of agency. She offers three kinds of consistency that play a role in the deliberation processes that lead to the formation of F-intentions: internal consistency (the actions plans made to undertake an F-intention must cohere in the right way to facilitate the completion of the goal), external consistency (conforming with an agent’s beliefs about the world), and global

consistency (meshing with the agent’s wider framework of projects and activities) (Pacherie 2007). Considerations about the influence of gender in the creation of narrative selves are directly relevant to the latter two, external and global consistency, and intention-formation. In the case of external consistency, one’s beliefs about the world would include socio-culturally situated beliefs about what a member of their gender group ought to do, or even can do, or beliefs about the ease or difficulty of pursuing certain ends as a member of (or not as a member of) a certain gender group. Global consistency would include projects and activities related to the socially situated functional role associated with one’s gender identity.

The main point is that the narrative sense of agency, as intention-formation and fulfillment, though in some sense rational, deliberate, and conscious, is neither untethered from gender norms nor ahistorical. The practices that scaffold this capacity involve exposure to narrative archetypes, which assume and reinforce gender norms. Through socio-cultural narrative practices we learn to provide reasons for past actions (retrospective F-intention attribution), or to deliberate about our future actions (creating prospective F-intentions), holistically in terms of our coherent, storied self. The limited narratives provided for or imposed upon individuals in virtue of their body types serve to maintain gender roles, and narrative agency is constrained by these problematic gender archetypes.

Again, though, the question of how transparent or explicit the content of the states (beliefs, desires, norms, and so on) need be that are considered in assessing consistency arises. Pacherie only provides the following on this: “Their sharing a common conceptual representational format is what makes possible a form of global consistency, at the personal level, of our desires, beliefs, intentions and other propositional attitudes. If we accept this common view, what follows is that for [F]-intentions to ever be such as to satisfy the rationality constraints they ought to, they must have conceptual content” (Pacherie 2007, p.184). However, as I’ve already shown, this need not necessarily be the case. Often the rules guiding our behaviors are not only not known or available to us, but it is doubtful that they could be robustly contentful prior to an explicit, conscious consideration of the reason (F-intention) for the kinds of actions we take when presented with particular contexts or opportunities for interaction.

Haslanger provides a good summary of the phenomena when she says that “one will develop unconscious patterns of behavior that reinforce the role in oneself and others and enable one to judge others by its associated norms. And in order for large groups of people to internalize similar or complementary norms, there must be a cultural vocabulary—concepts, narratives, images, scripts, cautionary tales—that provide the framework for action” (Haslanger 2012, p.11). The first part of this might be unproblematic for Pacherie, but the inclusion of culturally situated conceptual content – the cultural vocabulary – problematizes the view that deliberation processes only include propositional attitudes. As I have shown, attribution of behavior-guiding rules in propositional form often comes after the habituation of the behaviors. It seems unlikely that we would have propositional attitudes with very specific conceptual content about gender-specific norms if we haven’t previously been made aware that we (or others) were following those norms.

Put simply, the presence of gender norms in the narrative sense of agency is not reducible in the sense that all such norms are propositional rules that guide behaviors. Phenomenologically, one does not generally access a set of social rules or norms in order to make sense of their actions. Sometimes our embodied habits and practices give rise to narratively available rules though, at which point only can it be said that there are propositional attitudes that guide our intention-formation processes. To paraphrase Gallagher again, the rule can emerge from practice (2012). All of this, I have shown, bears the mark of gender. Now, in the final

section, I will consider the influence of gender on our minimal sense of agency.

### III. Gender and the Minimal Sense of Agency

As discussed in the first section, enactive approaches to understanding cognition have given us new ways of thinking about how rules, norms, and other features of experience derived from socio-cultural structures influence our embodied patterns of perceiving potentials for interaction (Varela et al. 1991; Ramstead et al. 2017; van Dijk and Rietveld 2017). This is not so different from what Iris Marion Young has said about the way that gender becomes part of the lived body. She writes: “Contexts of discourse and interaction position persons in systems of evaluation and expectations which often implicate their embodied being. ...The diverse phenomena that have come under the rubric of ‘gender’ in feminist theory can be redescribed in the idea of lived body as some among many forms of bodily habitus and interactions with others that we enact and experience” (1990, p. 17).

What is it, though, to be a lived body? We can think of this in terms of the embodied minimal sense of agency discussed earlier—as experiencing oneself pre-reflectively as the source of one’s own actions; however, now we can push this a bit further. We can think of the minimal sense of agency *as* the selection from the range of perceived possibilities for interaction as disclosed through the habituated body in continuous action. Agency in this minimal sense is the ongoing, immediate phenomenal sense of oneself as the proprietor of her actions that arises while engaged in action itself. If we experience our environment in terms of possibilities for interaction, which grow salient or more limited through embodied patterns of engagement, and agency is the pre-reflective sense of one’s own actions, then the immersed, immediate action-taking process is itself providing the minimal sense of agency.

In some cases this might simply involve awareness of or attending to some set of our M-intentions as we carry out complex P-intentions, but this could also involve our experience during the kinds of habituated, contentless P-intentions previously described. Given all that has been provided thus far, there are (at least) three ways that we can now consider how gender contributes to our minimal sense of agency that do not involve explicitly considering our adherence to gender norms.

First, as Young notes, the contexts of discourse involving gender do more than shape the narrative self; they shape our embodied habits and interactions. Drawing from the notion of the ‘I can’ of the lived body discussed in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Young’s analysis demonstrates how the internalization of gender norms can result in the experience of “I cannot” rather than “I can” in some contexts. As she describes above, we have an awareness of ourselves as situated within a myriad of socio-cultural networks, and our situation within these networks makes us subject to certain kinds of expectations. These expectations result in gender differences in bodily comportment due to women’s habituated underestimation of their bodily capacities (1990, p. 147). She calls this phenomenon, this lived constraint on bodily motility, an *inhibited intentionality*.

While Young’s analysis specifically attends to the underestimation of capacities by women, there are other norms (race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on) that complicate this inhibited intentionality (Weiss 2017). There are two additional points I’d like to add here. First, the idealization of an “I can” body as representative of the experience of men is problematic. The internalization of patriarchal norms limits the bodily comportment of men in different ways. For example, Western men are expected not to show weakness or fatigue. They are discouraged from

using their bodies to express certain emotions. Thus, men's bodies are subject to limitations due to gender norms in a way that provides lived constraints on their bodily compartments as well. Second, it should always be worrisome to idealize men as unfettered, as this kind of idealization can be used to devalue the traditional gender norms and traits applied to women. My analysis here is meant to be applicable to all genders while recognizing that the more oppressive gender constraints of this type have disproportionately affected women.<sup>4</sup>

On the enactivist framework, and using Young's notion of inhibited intentionality, we can expand on the body's role in what is disclosed as a potential for immediate interaction and how this relates to the minimal sense of agency. As explained in the first section, the body discloses potentials for interaction with the environment based on the body's capacities to interact. The body constrained and habituated through socio-cultural gender expectations, then, may not disclose its full range of possibilities in a given context. The sense of minimal agency, then, can be constrained through a limit on the habituated range of motion, and therefore constrain our perception of possible actions, arising from embodied inhibitions. In the minimal sense of agency, as agency-in-action, these constraints do not arise from a conscious deliberation of the range of possibilities the body can engage in, but are always already pre-reflectively present in the body's disclosure of the range of possibilities for action and the ways in which those actions may be undertaken. This, I believe, also gives a more developed account of what Haslanger has in mind when she contends that "although in understanding agents we must do justice to experience, we must also be aware that we are bodies, and in the practices of day-to-day life, the movement, location, and meaning of our bodies often has little to do with the agent's consciousness or intentions" (Haslanger 2012, p.11).

Second, repeated deliberate actions can prime one's responses to affordances for action such that the selection of an action or response to an affordance does not require the exercise of narrative agency. That is, of all the possibilities for action presented to an individual, previous considerations in terms of the narrative sense of agency, and the outcomes of the actions taken, lead to future embodied responses.

To put this another way, prospective F-intentions (whether goal-oriented or as behavior-guiding rules) and their associated contentful P-intentions can, over time, condition one into having P-intentions that are the result of habituation, not conscious deliberation. Put simply, our responses to certain situations and environmental solicitations can be conditioned such that P-intentions can become disconnected from F-intentions, even though they may have initially been the product of a deliberative process. The gender-related consistency constraints present in the narrative sense of agency, then, can also serve to constrain the embodied responses and action selections of an agent in the minimal sense of agency in the long term.

Third, the perception of potentials for action themselves are a product of habituated engagement through both kinds of agency. Again, perception is action-oriented. Perception is itself an active process, determined by "what we are *ready* to do" (Nöe 2004, p. 1). Additionally,

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<sup>4</sup> Again, it should be stressed that there is not a particular way in which these constraints affect women. Some, for example, may be due to compulsory gender maintenance, while others may be due to the kinds of dangers experienced in maintaining gender, especially for trans women, as discussed by Overall (2012) (note that her use of 'constraint' differs from that used here). There are also lived constraints that are more specific to interactions with other persons due to race (Fanon 1991), orientation, class, and other aspects of a person's social identity or situation.

perception is a skillful activity, developed over time through the successes and failures of our interactions, guided by the individual's previous history of productive engagements with the environment (Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014). The way in which we perceive our environments as affording possibilities for action, then, can be said to be affected by gender in relation to the two previously indicated influences and their effects on the ways in which we develop the skills of engaging with our environments. The most salient features of the environment, what we are *ready* to interact with, establish the way in which we tend to carry out our plans. In terms of intentions, the possibilities perceived by us as capable of fulfilling P-intentions are influenced by gender in the sense that these interactive skills will influence the types of things we perceive as capable of fulfilling our immediate goals.

With all this in place, it is worth re-considering the upstream dynamics between the effects of gender on the minimal sense of agency and the narrative sense of agency. I have already shown that gender effects our creation of the propositional attitudes that guide our F-intentions and their related P-intentions. I have also discussed the retrospective attribution of F-intentions to describe some of our consistent behavioral patterns. While in the last section I was concerned with the role that gender plays in the actual formulation of these propositional attitudes, I have now shown that those purposeful behavioral patterns are, to some extent, already influenced by gender, largely implicitly, in our minimal sense of agency. Thus gender is already influencing our intentional movements and actions in such a way that we are not fully aware of its effects when we retrospectively attribute the rules we think are guiding those behaviors.

## V. Conclusion

In this paper I have put forward some ways of understanding the effect of gender on the narrative and minimal senses of agency. However, this is not to say that one's senses of agency are wholly determined by gender. As Iris Marion Young says, "The idea of the lived body recognizes that a person's subjectivity is conditioned by sociocultural facts and the behavior and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen. At the same time, the theory of the lived body says that each person takes up and acts in relation to these unchosen facts in her own way" (Young 1990, p. 18). Awareness of the influence of gender can afford the agent the possibility of re-developing her narrative, of asserting creative control over her archetype, and of changing her patterns of engagement with the world. In Haslanger's words, we have some tools that can be used for "disrupting dominant schemas" (2012, p. 427).

Additionally, being aware of the influence of gender on our minimal sense of agency can help us bring our attention to several facets of this influence. We can be more attentive to the ways that we are drawn to interact with our environments, we can bring our habits of interaction into reflective analysis, and we can be more aware of the kinds of embodied, sub-personal (motor) programs and ways that we use our bodies in achieving our goals. For example, we can be aware that we may be acting with an inhibited sense of our range of motion, and this awareness can help us bring our M-intentions into the realm of phenomenological attention – which, in turn, can help us in training or re-training ourselves to explore a fuller range of mobility and interactive capacities.

Haslanger has previously made the case that we need "accounts of gender and race that take seriously the agency of women and people of color of both genders, and within which we can develop an understanding of agency that will aid feminist and antiracist efforts to empower critical social agents." (Haslanger 2012, p. 36). In this paper, I have offered some insight into

ways that we can look at the influence of gender and gender norms on the senses of agency. I have used the ambiguities involved in narrative and minimal senses of agency and intention formation to illustrate ways that gender can have an influence on both senses of agency, in the hopes that such work can be helpful in efforts to understand and minimize the injustices that this influence can inflict.

Acknowledgements:

This research was made possible by UPA and IPTA awards from the University of Wollongong, Australia. Many thanks go to Patrick McGivern, Sarah Sorial, Shaun Gallagher, Jarrah Aubourg, Rebecca Harrison, Inês Hipólito, Thomas Mann, Russell Meyer, Anco Peeters, Tailer Ransom, John Reynolds, and Miguel Segundo Ortin for helpful draft comments at various stages, as well as audiences at the Australasian Association of Philosophy meeting in Adelaide, 2017, and at the University of California Riverside Graduate Conference, 2017, for insightful discussions. The author also thanks two anonymous reviewers for their encouraging comments.

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