**BEING MEN AND WOMEN “THE RIGHT WAY” AND STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE: GENDER IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE AMONG ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN ONTARIO, CANADA**

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**Objectives:** To date, little attention has been paid to how people with intellectual disabilities develop and make sense of their gender identities (Björnsdóttir et al. 2017; Fitzgerald and Withers 2011; O’Shea and Frawley 2020), including how structural factors shape the very possibilities for multifaceted identities to exist within this social group. This gap is partly due to how people with intellectual disabilities are commonly de-sexualized and infantilized in ways that assume discussions about gender and sexual identities to be irrelevant (Björnsdóttir et al. 2017; Fitzgerald and Withers 2013). To address this gap, this presentation attends to how adults with intellectual disabilities make sense of their gender identities based on the “gender habitus” (Krais 2006) acquired in their lives. The gender habitus, which people acquire through socialization, shapes how individuals navigate the social world as gendered social actors.

**Method:** Drawing on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 46 adults with intellectual disabilities (33 men and 13 women) in Ontario and building on the theoretical concept of “gender habitus,” I explore participants’ understandings of what it means to be a man or woman. To be eligible, participants had to be at least 18 years old, self-identify as having an intellectual disability, have a clear understanding of their legal guardianship status, live in Ontario, and have an interest in sharing their romantic and sexual experiences. Combining a larger sample size and a comprehensive eligibility criterion allowed me to access a diverse sample, including men and women of different ages. The data was examined from a critical-constructivist framework (Guba and Lincoln 1994) using thematic analysis (Aurini et al. 2016).

**Results:** Participants commonly experienced gender-segregated spaces, faced surveillance, and were taught limited understandings of gender. Failing to perform gender “the way right way,” as some participants articulated, sometimes resulted in punishment and further surveillance in their lives. Unsurprisingly, many participants have striven to follow the limited gender roles offered to them. They often reported a shared belief that men and women are entirely different and that their roles differ within intimate relationships. However, for participants, it is not just a matter of drawing on dominant stereotypes. Instead, they have been actively taught simplistic formulas for being a ‘good’ man or a woman by people around them, which did not prepare them for real-life situations, much less for exploring the richness of gender identities.

**Discussion/Conclusions:** People with intellectual disabilities can sometimes be offered an extremely limited “menu of options” regarding gender identity and performance. Not only that, they were held accountable to heteronormative and de-sexualized ways of being a man or a woman by fear of landing into trouble with family members and direct care workers. The notion of “gender habitus” is useful for us to understand these sexualities as embodied gendered practices uniquely shaped by the intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality.