

# THE GENDERED SOCIETY



MICHAEL KIMMEL

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# The Gendered Society

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*Fourth Edition*

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*For SWS*

*“Feminist professionals certainly know about role conflict. SWS is one organization where the various roles of sociologist, activist, parent, partner, friend, mentor, teacher, and writer find holistic support and development. SWS is a home base, a safe house, a launching place.”*

—CARLA HOWERY, SWS President (1992)

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## PREFACE

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As this book enters its fourth edition, it's been adopted widely around the country and translated into several languages. It's personally gratifying, of course, but more gratifying is the embrace of the book's vision of a world in which gender inequality is but a distant anachronism, and a serious intellectual confrontation with gender inequality, and the differences that such inequality produces, is a central part of the struggle to bring such a world about. I'm proud to contribute to that struggle.

In this fourth edition, I've tried to incorporate the suggestions and to respond to the criticisms various reviewers and readers have offered. I've continued to expand and update the book, trying to take account of new material, new arguments, new data. In the last edition, I added a chapter on the gendered media. This edition offers a new chapter on gender and religion. In addition, I have paid more and closer attention to issues surrounding bisexuality and transgenderism, and I have added a new box theme throughout the book that helps to dispel gender myths (entitled "Oh, Really?"). We have also redesigned the book to incorporate a more open look and feel, and we have included many new visuals—photos, illustrations, and cartoons—to aid student comprehension. Lastly, for this edition, we are pleased to offer a dedicated instructor's manual, which includes testing items and teaching suggestions.

This background suggests some of the ways that this book is a work in progress. Not a week goes by that I don't hear from a colleague or a student who is using the book and has a question, a comment, a suggestion, or a criticism. I wish I could have incorporated everyone's suggestions (well, not *everyone's!*); all engage me in the never-ending conversation about gender and gender inequality of which this book is but a small part.

It's ironic that as each edition comes close to completion, my identities as a writer and father are brought into sharper relief. As I completed the second edition, I remarked that people are constantly asking if having a son has forced me to change my views about biological difference. (It hasn't; if anything, watching the daily bombardment of messages about gender to which my son is constantly subjected, my constructionist

ideas have grown stronger. Anything that was so biologically “natural” wouldn’t need such relentless—and relentlessly frantic—reassertion.)

As my son approaches his preteen years, I’m watching something new: The ways in which those norms about masculinity are beginning to constrain as well as construct Zachary’s life.

Let me share one experience to illustrate. As his eighth birthday approached, his mother and I asked what sort of theme he wanted for his party. For the previous two years, we’d had a skating party at the local rink—the rink where his hockey team skates early on Saturday mornings. He rejected that idea. “Been there and done that, Dad” was the end of that. “And besides I skate there all the time.”

Other themes that other boys in his class had recently had—indoor sports activities, a Red Bulls soccer game, secret agent treasure hunt—were also summarily rejected. What could he possibly want? “A dancing party,” he said finally. “One with a disco ball.”

His mother and I looked at each other. “A dancing party?” we asked. “But Zachary, you’re only eight.”

“Oh, no, not like a ‘dancing’ party like that,” he said, making air quotation marks. “I mean like Cotton Eye Joe and the Virginia Reel and Cha-Cha Slide and like dance games.”

So a dancing party it was—for twenty-four of his closest friends (his school encourages inviting everyone to the party). An even split of boys and girls. All twelve girls danced their heads off. “This is the best party ever!” shouted Grace. The other girls squealed with delight. Four of the boys, including Zachary, danced right along with the girls. They had a blast.

Four other boys walked in, checked out the scene, and immediately walked over to a wall, where they folded their arms across their chests and leaned back. “I don’t dance,” said one. “Yuck,” said another. They watched, periodically tried to disrupt the dancing, seemed to make fun of the dancers, stuffed themselves with snacks, and had a lousy time.

Four other boys began the afternoon by dancing happily, with not a hint of self-consciousness. But then they saw the leaners, the boys propped up against the wall. One by one these dancers stopped, went over to the wall, and watched.

But they couldn’t stay for long. They kept looking at the kids dancing their hilarious line dances, or the freeze dance, and they inched their way back, dancing like fiends, only to stop, notice the passive leaners again, and drift back to the wall.

Back and forth they went all afternoon, alternately exhilarated and exasperated, joyously dancing and joylessly watching. My heart ached for them as I watched them pulled between being children and being “guys.”

Or is it between being *people* and being *guys*? People capable of a full range of pleasures—from smashing an opposing skater into the boards and that down-on-the-knee fist-pump after scoring a goal, to do-si-doing your partner or that truly inane faux lassoing in Cotton Eye Joe. Or guys, for whom pleasure now becomes defined as making fun of other people’s joy.

Poised between childhood and adult masculinity, these boys were choosing, and one could see how agonizing it was. They hated being on the sidelines, yet stayed impervious until they could stand it no longer. But once they were back on the dance floor, they were piercingly aware that they were now the objects of ridicule.

This is the price we pay to be men: the suppression of joy, sensuality, and exuberance. It is meager compensation to feel superior to the other chumps who have the audacity to enjoy themselves. I pray my dancing fool of a son will resist the pull of that wall. His is the dance of childhood.

It is this “other” side of boys lives—not that they will become men—but that they are boys, children, and we daily watch what is also so *naturally* and obviously hard-wired systematically excised from boys’ lives. The demands of boyhood, which have nothing whatever to do with evolutionary imperatives or brain chemistry, cripple boys, forcing them to renounce those feelings and suppress and deny the instinct to care. And those who deviate will be savagely punished.

Most of those who are punished will survive, and many will thrive. Some don’t have the inner resilience; they may self-medicate, withdraw into depression or despair, or, in a moment of self-fulfilling prophecy, become the “deviant” they are imagined to be. And a rare few will explode with a rage of aggrieved entitlement—a rage that blames the world for their pain—and decide it is restorative of some perverse sense of justice to take as many others with them as they leaves in a blaze of glory. That is the story of Cho Seung-Hui, who murdered thirty-two students and professors at Virginia Tech before taking his own life. That he was deranged does not predict the self-justifyingly deranged logic he used in his “righteous” rampage. His was a madness of revenge, retaliation for a laundry list of injuries he had suffered at the hands of others. Focusing only on the madness means we never actually examine that laundry list.

Moving from my eight-year-old’s dancing party to one crazed executioner may seem like a big jump. It does to me too. These incidents illustrate the opposite ends on a continuum of gender identity issues, moments where the play of ideology, inequality, and identity lies more exposed than they usually are. I hope that this book contributes to exposing and exploring the full range of those continua along which we all array ourselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editorial and marketing team at Oxford University Press, and especially Sherith Pankratz, Whitney Laemmler and Amy Krivohlavek, have been, as always, terrific to work with. I have relied on the critical reviews by colleagues who have adopted the book (and also from those who haven’t) to help me try and say it clearly and correctly.

I would also like to thank the reviewers of the third edition, who provided me with helpful feedback and suggestions:

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I am grateful to Bethany Coston for her research assistance.



And I rely constantly on the support from my colleagues and friends, and the love of my family.

This summer, I was named “Feminist Mentor,” an award given annually by the Sociologists for Women in Society. In accepting, I tried to describe how honored I was by this organization’s award. In my remarks accepting the award, I pointed to the first preposition in the organization’s name: Sociologists *for* Women in Society:

I am a sociologist, committed to gender equality, committed to a research, teaching and mentoring agenda that is “for” women in society. To be for women, for gender equality, has required that I confront, challenge, and indeed try to change some of the inherited notions I had about pedagogy and about mentoring relationships. It has been through a commitment to gender equality, first as a theory and eventually as a practice, that I’ve worked to empower my students, male and female, as sociologists committed to both rigorous research and political change.

We’re often told in the academy that we have to check our biases at the door and refrain from political preaching. I think that unless we are politically committed our work will be lifeless and our lives emptier. But unless we commit ourselves to intellectual rigor, we will simply be preaching to an increasingly shrill choir. We need to have something to say, and to know how to say it.

I am grateful to SWS, above all, for providing a home for it within our profession for 40 years. This book is for them.



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# Introduction

## *Human Beings: An Engendered Species*

In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes, and to make them keep pace with the other, but in two pathways which are always different.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE  
*Democracy in America* (1835)

Daily, we hear how men and women are different. We hear that we come from different planets. They say we have different brain chemistries, different brain organization, different hormones. They say our different anatomies lead to different destinies. They say we have different ways of knowing, listen to different moral voices, have different ways of speaking and hearing each other.

You'd think we were different species, like, say, lobsters and giraffes, or Martians and Venutians. In his best-selling book, pop psychologist John Gray informs us that not only do women and men communicate differently, but also they “think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need, and appreciate differently.”<sup>1</sup> It's a miracle of cosmic proportions that we ever understand one another!

Yet, despite these alleged interplanetary differences, we're all together in the same workplaces, where we are evaluated by the same criteria for raises, promotions, bonuses, and tenure. We sit in the same classrooms, eat in the same dining halls, read the same books, and are subject to the same criteria for grading. We live in the same houses,

prepare and eat the same meals, read the same newspapers, and tune in to the same television programs.

What I have come to call this “interplanetary” theory of complete and universal *gender difference* is also typically the way we explain another universal phenomenon: *gender inequality*. Gender is not simply a system of classification, by which biological males and biological females are sorted, separated, and socialized into equivalent sex roles. Gender also expresses the universal inequality between women and men. When we speak about gender we also speak about hierarchy, power, and inequality, not simply difference.

So the two tasks of any study of gender, it seems to me, are to explain both difference and inequality or, to be alliterative, *difference* and *dominance*. Every general explanation of gender must address two central questions and their ancillary derivative questions.

First: *Why is it that virtually every single society differ gender?* Why are women and men perceived as different in every known society? What are the differences that are perceived? Why is gender at least one—if not the central—basis for the division of labor?

Second: *Why is it that virtually every known society is also based on male dominance?* Why does virtually every society divide social, political, and economic resources unequally between the genders? And why is it that men always get more? Why is a gendered division of labor also an unequal division of labor? Why are women’s tasks and men’s tasks valued differently?

It is clear, as we shall see, that there are dramatic differences among societies regarding the type of gender differences, the levels of gender inequality, and the amount of violence (implied or real) that are necessary to maintain both systems of difference and domination. But the basic facts remain: *Virtually every society known to us is founded upon assumptions of gender difference and the politics of gender inequality.*

On these axiomatic questions, two basic schools of thought prevail: biological determinism and differential socialization. We know them as “nature” and “nurture,” and the question of which is dominant has been debated for a century in classrooms, at dinner parties, by political adversaries, and among friends and families. Are men and women different because they are “hardwired” to be different, or are they different because they’ve been taught to be? Is biology destiny, or is it that human beings are more flexible, and thus subject to change?

Most of the arguments about gender difference begin, as will this book, with biology (in chapter 2). Women and men *are* biologically different, after all. Our reproductive anatomies are different, and so are our reproductive destinies. Our brain structures differ, our brain chemistries differ. Our musculature is different. Different levels of different hormones circulate through our different bodies. Surely, these add up to fundamental, intractable, and universal differences, and these differences provide the foundation for male domination, don’t they?

The answer is an unequivocal maybe. Or, perhaps more accurately, yes and no. There are very few people who would suggest that there are no differences between males and females. At least, I wouldn’t suggest it. What social scientists call *sex differences* refers precisely to that catalog of anatomical, hormonal, chemical, and physical

differences between women and men. But even here, as we shall see, there are enormous ranges of femaleness and maleness. Though our musculature differs, plenty of women are physically stronger than plenty of men. Though on average our chemistries are different, it's not an all-or-nothing proposition—women do have varying levels of androgens, and men have varying levels of estrogen in their systems. And though our brain structure may be differently lateralized, males and females both do tend to use both sides of their brain. And it is far from clear that these biological differences automatically and inevitably lead men to dominate women. Could we not imagine, as some writers already have, a culture in which women's biological abilities to bear and nurse children might be seen as the expression of such ineffable power—the ability to create life—that strong men wilt in impotent envy?

In fact, in order to underscore this issue, most social and behavioral scientists now use the term “gender” in a different way than we use the term “sex.” “Sex” refers to the biological apparatus, the male and the female—our chromosomal, chemical, anatomical organization. “Gender” refers to the meanings that are attached to those differences within a culture. “Sex” is male and female; “gender” is masculinity and femininity—what it means to be a man or a woman. Even the Supreme Court understands this distinction. In a 1994 case, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote:

The word “gender” has acquired the new and useful connotation of cultural or attitudinal characteristics (as opposed to physical characteristics) distinctive to the sexes. That is to say, gender is to sex as feminine is to female and masculine is to male.<sup>2</sup>

And whereas biological sex varies very little, gender varies enormously. What it means to possess the anatomical configuration of male or female means very different things depending on where you are, who you are, and when you are living.

It fell to anthropologists to detail some of those differences in the meanings of masculinity and femininity. What they documented is that gender means different things to different people—that it varies cross-culturally. (I discuss and review the anthropological evidence in chapter 3.) Some cultures, like our own, encourage men to be stoic and to prove their masculinity. Men in other cultures seem even more preoccupied with demonstrating sexual prowess than American men. Other cultures prescribe a more relaxed definition of masculinity, based on civic participation, emotional responsiveness, and the collective provision for the community's needs. And some cultures encourage women to be decisive and competitive, whereas others insist that women are naturally passive, helpless, and dependent. What it meant to be a man or a woman in seventeenth-century France and what it means among Aboriginal peoples in the Australian outback at the turn of the twenty-first century are so far apart that comparison is difficult, if not impossible. The differences between two cultures are often greater than the differences between the two genders. If the meanings of gender vary from culture to culture and vary within any one culture over historical time, then understanding gender must employ the tools of the social and behavioral sciences and history.

The other reigning school of thought that explains both gender difference and gender domination is *differential socialization*—the “nurture” side of the equation. Men and women are different because we are taught to be different. From the moment of birth, males and females are treated differently. Gradually we acquire the traits, behaviors,

and attitudes that our culture defines as “masculine” or “feminine.” We are not necessarily born different: We become different through this process of socialization.

Nor are we born biologically predisposed toward gender inequality. Domination is not a trait carried on the Y chromosome; it is the outcome of the different cultural valuing of men’s and women’s experiences. Thus, the adoption of masculinity and femininity implies the adoption of “political” ideas that what women do is not as culturally important as what men do.

Developmental psychologists have also examined the ways in which the meanings of masculinity and femininity change over the course of a person’s life. The issues confronting a man about proving himself and feeling successful will change, as will the social institutions in which he will attempt to enact those experiences. The meanings of femininity are subject to parallel changes, for example, among prepubescent women, women in childbearing years, and postmenopausal women, as they are different for women entering the labor market and those retiring from it.

Although we typically cast the debate in terms of *either* biological determinism or differential socialization—nature versus nurture—it may be useful to pause for a moment to observe what characteristics they have in common. Both schools of thought share two fundamental assumptions. First, both “nature lovers” and “nurturers” see women and men as markedly different from each other—truly, deeply, and irreversibly different. (Nurture does allow for some possibility of change, but it still argues that the process of socialization is a process of making males and females different from each other—differences that are normative, culturally necessary, and “natural.”) And both schools of thought assume that the differences *between* women and men are far greater and more decisive (and worthy of analysis) than the differences that might be observed *among* men or *among* women. Thus, both nature lovers and nurturers subscribe to some version of the interplanetary theory of gender.

Second, both schools of thought assume that gender domination is the inevitable outcome of gender difference, that difference causes domination. To the biologists, it may be because pregnancy and lactation make women more vulnerable and in need of protection, or because male musculature makes men more adept hunters, or because testosterone makes them more aggressive with other men and with women, too. Or it may be that men have to dominate women in order to maximize their chances to pass on their genes. Psychologists of “gender roles” tell us that, among other things, men and women are taught to devalue women’s experiences, perceptions, and abilities and to overvalue men’s.

I argue in this book that both of these propositions are inadequate. First, I hope to show that the differences between women and men are not nearly as great as are the differences among women or among men. Many perceived differences turn out to be differences based less on gender than on the social positions people occupy. Second, I will argue that gender difference is the product of gender inequality, and not the other way around. In fact, gender difference is the chief outcome of gender inequality, because it is through the idea of difference that inequality is legitimated. As one sociologist recently put it, “the very creation of difference is the foundation on which inequality rests.”<sup>3</sup>

Using what social scientists have come to call a “social constructionist” approach—I explain this in chapter 5—I will make the case that neither gender difference nor gender

inequality is inevitable in the nature of things nor, more specifically, in the nature of our bodies. Neither is difference—and domination—explainable solely by reference to differential socialization of boys and girls into sex roles typical of men and women.

When proponents of both nature and nurture positions assert that gender inequality is the inevitable outcome of gender difference, they take, perhaps inadvertently, a political position that assumes that inequality may be lessened or that its most negative effects may be ameliorated, but that it cannot be eliminated—precisely because it is based upon intractable differences. On the other hand, to assert, as I do, that the exaggerated gender differences that we see are not as great as they appear and that they are the result of inequality allows a far greater political latitude. By eliminating gender inequality, we will remove the foundation upon which the entire edifice of gender difference is built.

What will remain, I believe, is not some nongendered androgynous gruel, in which differences between women and men are blended and everyone acts and thinks in exactly the same way. Quite the contrary. I believe that as gender inequality decreases, the differences among people—differences grounded in race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, *as well as* gender—will emerge in a context in which all of us can be appreciated for our individual uniqueness as well as our commonality.

#### **MAKING GENDER VISIBLE FOR BOTH WOMEN AND MEN**

To make my case, I shall rely upon a dramatic transformation in thinking about gender that has occurred over the past thirty years. In particular, three decades of pioneering work by feminist scholars, both in traditional disciplines and in women's studies, have made us aware of the centrality of gender in shaping social life. We now know that gender is one of the central organizing principles around which social life revolves. Until the 1970s, social scientists would have listed only class and race as the master statuses that define and proscribe social life. If you wanted to study gender in the 1960s in social science, for example, you would have found but one course designed to address your needs—Marriage and the Family—which was sort of the “Ladies Auxiliary” of the social sciences. There were no courses on gender. But today, gender has joined race and class in our understanding of the foundations of an individual's identity. Gender, we now know, is one of the axes around which social life is organized and through which we understand our own experiences.

In the past thirty years, feminist scholars properly focused most of their attention on women—on what Catharine Stimpson has called the “omissions, distortions, and trivializations” of women's experiences—and the spheres to which women have historically been consigned, like private life and the family.<sup>4</sup> Women's history sought to rescue from obscurity the lives of significant women who had been ignored or whose work had been minimized by traditional androcentric scholarship and to examine the everyday lives of women in the past—the efforts, for example, of laundresses, factory workers, pioneer homesteaders, or housewives to carve out lives of meaning and dignity in a world controlled by men. Whether the focus has been on the exemplary or the ordinary, though, feminist scholarship has made it clear that gender is a central axis in women's lives.

But when we think of the word “gender,” what gender comes to mind? It is not unusual to find, in courses on history of gender, psychology of gender, or sociology of

gender, that the classroom is populated almost entirely by women. It's as if only women had gender and were therefore interested in studying it. Occasionally, of course, some brave young man will enroll in a women's studies class. You'll usually find him cringing in the corner, in anticipation of feeling blamed for all the sins of millennia of patriarchal oppression.

It's my intention in this book to build upon the feminist approaches to gender by also making masculinity visible. We need, I think, to integrate men into our curriculum. Because it is *men*—or, rather masculinity—who are invisible.

"What?!" I can hear you saying. "Did he just say 'integrate men into our curriculum'? Men are invisible? What's he talking about?! Men aren't invisible. They're everywhere."

And, of course, that's true. Men are ubiquitous in universities and professional schools and in the public sphere in general. And it's true that if you look at the college curriculum, every course that doesn't have the word "women" in the title is about men. Every course that isn't in "women's studies" is de facto a course in "men's studies"—except we usually call it "history," "political science," "literature," "chemistry."

But when we study men, we study them as political leaders, military heroes, scientists, writers, artists. Men, themselves, are invisible *as men*. Rarely, if ever, do we see a course that examines the lives of men as men. What is the impact of gender on the lives of these famous men? How does masculinity play a part in the lives of great artists, writers, presidents, etc.? How does masculinity play out in the lives of "ordinary" men—in factories and on farms, in union halls and large corporations? On this score, the traditional curriculum suddenly draws a big blank. Everywhere one turns there are courses about men, but virtually no information on masculinity.

Several years ago, this yawning gap inspired me to undertake a cultural history of the idea of masculinity in America, to trace the development and shifts in what it has meant to be a man over the course of our history.<sup>5</sup> What I found is that American men have been very articulate in describing what it means to be a man and in seeing whatever they have done as a way to prove their manhood, but that we hadn't known how to hear them.

Integrating gender into our courses is a way to fulfill the promise of women's studies—by understanding men as gendered as well. In my university, for example, the course on nineteenth-century British literature includes a deeply "gendered" reading of the Brontës that discusses their feelings about femininity, marriage, and relations between the sexes. Yet not a word is spoken about Dickens and masculinity, especially about his feelings about fatherhood and the family. Dickens is understood as a "social problem" novelist, and his issue was class relations—this despite the fact that so many of Dickens's most celebrated characters are young boys who have no fathers and who are searching for authentic families. And there's not a word about Thomas Hardy's ambivalent ideas about masculinity and marriage in, say, *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy's grappling with premodernist conceptions of an apathetic universe is what we discuss. And my wife tells me that in her nineteenth-century American literature class at Princeton, gender was the main topic of conversation when the subject was Edith Wharton, but the word was never spoken when they discussed Henry James, in whose work gendered anxiety erupts variously as chivalric contempt, misogynist rage, and sexual ambivalence. James, we're told, is "about" the form of the novel,

narrative technique, the stylistic powers of description and characterization. Certainly not about gender.

So we continue to act as if gender applied only to women. Surely the time has come to make gender visible to men. As the Chinese proverb has it, the fish are the last to discover the ocean.

This was made clear to me in a seminar on feminism I attended in the early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> In that seminar, in a discussion between two women, I first confronted this invisibility of gender to men. During one meeting, a white woman and a black woman were discussing whether all women are, by definition, “sisters,” because they all have essentially the same experiences and because all women face a common oppression by men. The white woman asserted that the fact that they are both women bonds them, in spite of racial differences. The black woman disagreed.

“When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?” she asked.

“I see a woman,” replied the white woman.

“That’s precisely the problem,” responded the black woman. “I see a *black* woman. To me, race is visible every day, because race is how I am *not* privileged in our culture. Race is invisible to you, because it’s how you are privileged. It’s why there will always be differences in our experience.”

At this point in the conversation, I groaned—more audibly, perhaps, than I had intended. Because I was the only man in the room, someone asked what my response had meant.

“Well,” I said, “when I look in the mirror, I see a human being. I’m universally generalizable. As a middle-class white man, I have no class, no race, no gender. I’m the generic person!”

Sometimes, I like to think that it was on that day that I *became* a middle-class white man. Sure, I had been all those before, but they had not meant much to me. Until then, I had thought myself generic, universally generalizable. Since then, I’ve begun to understand that race, class, and gender don’t refer only to other people, who are marginalized by race, class, or gender privilege. Those terms also describe me. I enjoyed the privilege of invisibility. The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred. What make us marginal or powerless are the processes we see. Invisibility is a privilege in another sense—as a luxury. Only white people in our society have the luxury not to think about race every minute of their lives. And only men have the luxury to pretend that gender does not matter.

Consider another example of how power is so often invisible to those who have it. Many of you have e-mail addresses, and you send e-mail messages to people all over the world. You’ve probably noticed that there is one big difference between e-mail addresses in the United States and e-mail addresses of people in other countries: Their addresses end with a “country code.” So, for example, if you were writing to someone in South Africa, you’d put “za” at the end or “jp” for Japan or “uk” for England (United Kingdom) or “de” for Germany (Deutschland). But when you write to people in the United States, the e-mail address ends with “edu” for an educational institution, “org” for an organization, “gov” for a federal government office, and “com” or “net” for commercial Internet providers. Why is it that the United States doesn’t have a country code?



It is because when you are the dominant power in the world, everyone else needs to be named. When you are “in power,” you needn’t draw attention to yourself as a specific entity, but, rather, you can pretend to be the generic, the universal, the generalizable. From the point of view of the United States, all other countries are “other” and thus need to be named, marked, noted. Once again, privilege is invisible. In the world of the Internet, as Michael Jackson sang, “We are the world.”

There are consequences to this invisibility: Privilege, as well as gender, remains invisible. And it is hard to generate a politics of inclusion from invisibility. The invisibility of privilege means that many men, like many white people, become defensive and angry when confronted with the statistical realities or the human consequences of racism or sexism. Because our privilege is invisible, we may become defensive. Hey, we may even feel like victims ourselves. Invisibility “creates a neurotic oscillation between a sense of entitlement and a sense of unearned privilege,” as journalist Edward Ball put it, having recently explored his own family’s history as one of the largest slave-owning families in South Carolina.<sup>7</sup>

The continued invisibility of masculinity also means that the gendered standards that are held up as the norm appear to us to be gender-neutral. The illusion of gender neutrality has serious consequences for both women and men. It means that men can maintain the fiction that they are being measured by “objective” standards; for women, it means that they are being judged by someone else’s yardstick. At the turn of the twentieth century, the great sociologist Georg Simmel underscored this issue when he wrote:

We measure the achievements and the commitments...of males and females in terms of specific norms and values; but these norms are not neutral, standing above the contrasts of the sexes; they have themselves a male character... The standards of art and the demands of patriotism, the general mores and the specific social ideas, the equity of practical judgments and the objectivity of theoretical knowledge...—all these categories are formally generically human, but are in fact masculine in terms of their actual historical formation. If we call ideas that claim absolute validity objectivity binding, then it is a fact that in the historical life of our species there operates the equation: objective = male.<sup>8</sup>

Simmel’s theoretical formulation echoes in our daily interactions. Recently, I was invited to be a guest lecturer in a course on sociology of gender taught by one of my female colleagues. As I entered the lecture hall, one student looked up from her notes and exclaimed, “Finally, an objective opinion.” Now, I’m neither more nor less “objective” than my colleagues, but, in this student’s eyes, I was seen as objective—the disconnected, disembodied, deracinated degendered voice of scientific and rational objectivity. I am what objectivity looks like! (One ironic result is that I could probably say more outlandish things in a classroom than my female colleagues could. If a female, or African American, professor were to make a statement such as, “White men are privileged in American society,” our students might respond by saying, “Of course, you’d say that. You’re biased.” They’d see such a normative statement as revealing the inherent biases of gender or race, a case of special pleading. But when I say it? As objective fact, transmitted by an objective professor, they’ll probably take notes.)

Such an equation that “objective = male” has enormous practical consequences in every arena of our lives, from the elementary school classroom to professional and graduate schools and in every workplace we enter. As Simmel writes, “Man’s *position of power* does not only assure his relative superiority over the woman but it assures that his standards become generalized as generically human standards that are to govern the behavior of men and women alike.”<sup>9</sup>

### THE CURRENT DEBATE

I believe that we are, at this moment, having a national debate about masculinity in this country—but that we don’t know it. For example, what gender comes to mind when I invoke the following current American problems: “teen violence,” “gang violence,” “suburban violence,” “drug violence,” “violence in the schools”? And what gender comes to mind when I say the words “suicide bomber” or “terrorist hijacker”?

Of course, you’ve imagined men. And not just any men—but younger men, in their teens and twenties, and relatively poorer men, from the working class or lower middle class.

But how do our social commentators discuss these problems? Do they note that the problems of youth and violence are really problems of young *men* and violence? Do they ever mention that everywhere ethnic nationalism sets up shop, it is young men who are the shopkeepers? Do they ever mention masculinity at all?

No. Listen, for example, to the voice of one expert, asked to comment on the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay twenty-one-year-old college student at the University of Wyoming. After being reminded that young men account for 80 percent to 90 percent of people arrested for “gay-bashing” crimes, the reporter quoted a sociologist as saying that “[t]his youth variable tells us they are working out identity issues, making the transition away from home into adulthood.”<sup>10</sup> This “*youth* variable”? What had been a variable about age and gender had been transformed into a variable about age. Gender had disappeared. That is the sound of silence, what invisibility looks like.

Now, imagine that these were all women—all the ethnic nationalists, the militias, the gay-bashers. Would that not be *the* story, the *only* story? Would not a gender analysis be at the center of every single story? Would we not hear from experts on female socialization, frustration, anger, premenstrual syndrome, and everything else under the sun? But the fact that these are men earns nary a word.

Take one final example. What if it had been young girls who opened fire on their classmates in West Paducah, Kentucky; in Pearl, Mississippi; in Jonesboro, Arkansas; or in Springfield, Oregon? And what if nearly all the children who died were boys? Do you think that the social outcry would demand that we investigate the “inherent violence” of southern culture? Or simply express dismay that young “people” have too much access to guns? And yet no one seemed to mention that the young boys who actually committed those crimes were simply doing—albeit in dramatic form at a younger age—what American men have been taught to do for centuries when they are upset and angry. Men don’t get mad; they get even. (I explore the gender of violence in chapter 12.)

I believe that until we make gender visible for both women and men we will not, as a culture, adequately know how to address these issues. That's not to say that all we have to do is address masculinity. These issues are complex, requiring analyses of the political economy of global economic integration, of the transformation of social classes, of urban poverty and hopelessness, of racism. But if we ignore masculinity—if we let it remain invisible—we will never completely understand them, let alone resolve them.

### THE PLURAL AND THE POWERFUL

When I use the term “gender,” then, it is with the explicit intention of discussing both masculinity and femininity. But even these terms are inaccurate because they imply that there is one simple definition of masculinity and one definition of femininity. One of the important elements of a social constructionist approach—especially if we intend to dislodge the notion that gender differences alone are decisive—is to explore the differences *among* men and *among* women, because, as it turns out, these are often more decisive than the differences between women and men.

Within any one society at any one moment, several meanings of masculinity and femininity co-exist. Simply put, not all American men and women are the same. Our experiences are also structured by class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, region. Each of these axes modifies the others. Just because we make gender visible doesn't mean that we make these other organizing principles of social life invisible. Imagine, for example, an older, black, gay man in Chicago and a young, white, heterosexual farm boy in Iowa. Wouldn't they have different definitions of masculinity? Or imagine a twenty-two-year-old wealthy, Asian-American, heterosexual woman in San Francisco and a poor, white, Irish Catholic lesbian in Boston. Wouldn't their ideas about what it means to be a woman be somewhat different?

If gender varies across cultures, over historical time, among men and women within any one culture, and over the life course, can we really speak of masculinity or femininity as though they were constant, universal essences, common to all women and to all men? If not, gender must be seen as an ever-changing fluid assemblage of meanings and behaviors. In that sense, we must speak of *masculinities* and *femininities* and thus recognize the different definitions of masculinity and femininity that we construct. By pluralizing the terms, we acknowledge that masculinity and femininity mean different things to different groups of people at different times.

At the same time, we can't forget that all masculinities and femininities are not created equal. American men and women must also contend with a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we are expected to measure ourselves. We thus come to know what it means to be a man or a woman in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others”—racial minorities, sexual minorities. For men, the classic “other” is, of course, women. It feels imperative to most men that they make it clear—eternally, compulsively, decidedly—that they are unlike women.

For most men, this is the “hegemonic” definition—the one that is held up as the model for all of us. The hegemonic definition of masculinity is “constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women,” writes sociologist R. W. Connell. The sociologist Erving Goffman once described this hegemonic definition of masculinity like this:

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports . . . Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.<sup>11</sup>

Women contend with an equally exaggerated ideal of femininity, which Connell calls “emphasized femininity.” Emphasized femininity is organized around compliance with gender inequality and is “oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men.” One sees emphasized femininity in “the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men’s desire for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and childcare as a response to labor-market discrimination against women.”<sup>12</sup> Emphasized femininity exaggerates gender difference as a strategy of “adaptation to men’s power” stressing empathy and nurturance; “real” womanhood is described as “fascinating,” and women are advised that they can wrap men around their fingers by knowing and playing by the “rules.” In one research study, an eight-year-old boy captured this emphasized femininity eloquently in a poem he wrote:

If I were a girl, I’d have to attract a guy  
 wear makeup; sometimes.  
 Wear the latest style of clothes and try to be likable.  
 I probably wouldn’t play any physical sports like football or soccer.  
 I don’t think I would enjoy myself around men  
 in fear of rejection  
 or under the pressure of attracting them.<sup>13</sup>

### **GENDER DIFFERENCES AS “DECEPTIVE DISTINCTIONS”**

The existence of multiple masculinities and femininities dramatically undercuts the idea that the gender differences we observe are due solely to differently gendered people occupying gender-neutral positions. Moreover, that these masculinities and femininities are arrayed along a hierarchy, and measured against one another, buttresses the argument that domination creates and exaggerates difference.

The interplanetary theory of gender assumes, whether through biology or socialization, that women act like women, no matter where they are, and that men act like men, no matter where they are. Psychologist Carol Tavris argues that such binary thinking leads to what philosophers call the “law of the excluded middle,” which, as she reminds us, “is where most men and women fall in terms of their psychological qualities, beliefs, abilities, traits and values.”<sup>14</sup> It turns out that many of the differences between women and men that we observe in our everyday lives are actually not *gender* differences at all, but rather differences that are the result of being in different positions or in different arenas. It’s not that gendered individuals occupy these ungendered positions, but rather that the positions themselves elicit the behaviors we see as gendered. The sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein calls these “deceptive distinctions” because, although they appear to be based on gender, they are actually based on something else.<sup>15</sup>

Take, for example, the well-known differences in communication patterns observed by Deborah Tannen in her best-selling book, *You Just Don't Understand*. Tannen argues that women and men communicate with the languages of their respective planets—men employ the competitive language of hierarchy and domination to get ahead; women create webs of inclusion with softer, more embracing language that ensures that everyone feels okay. At home, men are the strong, silent types, grunting monosyllabically to their wives, who want to use conversation to create intimacy.<sup>16</sup>

But it turns out that those very same monosyllabic men are very verbal at work, where they are in positions of dependency and powerlessness, and need to use conversation to maintain a relationship with their superiors at work; and their wives are just as capable of using language competitively to maximize their position in a corporate hierarchy. When he examined the recorded transcripts of women's and men's testimony in trials, anthropologist William O'Barr concluded that the witnesses' occupation was a more accurate predictor of their use of language than was gender. "So-called women's language is neither characteristic of all women, nor limited only to women," O'Barr writes. If women use "powerless" language, it may be due "to the greater tendency of women to occupy relatively powerless social positions" in society.<sup>17</sup> Communication differences turn out to be "deceptive distinctions" because rarely do we observe the communication patterns of dependent men and executive women.

We could take another example from the world of education, which I explore in chapter 7. Aggregate differences in girls' and boys' scores on standardized math tests have led people to speculate that whereas males have a natural propensity for arithmetic figures, females have a "fear of math." Couple this with their "fear of success" in the workplace, and you might find that women manage money less effectively—with less foresight, less calculation, less care. The popular writer Colette Dowling, author of the best-selling 1981 book *The Cinderella Complex* (a book that claimed that underneath their apparent ambition, competence, and achievement, women "really" are waiting for Prince Charming to rescue them and carry them off into a romantic sunset, a future in which they could be as passive and helpless as they secretly wanted to be), interviewed sixty-five women in their late fifties about money matters and found that only two had *any* investment plans for their retirements. Broke and bankrupt after several best-sellers and single again herself, Dowling argues that this relates to "conflicts with dependency. Money savvy is connected with masculinity in our culture," she told an interviewer. "That leaves women with the feeling that if they want to take care of themselves and are good at it, the quid pro quo is they'll never hook up with a relationship." Because of ingrained femininity, women end up shooting themselves in the foot.<sup>18</sup>

But such assertions fly in the face of all available research, argues the financial expert Jane Bryant Quinn, herself the author of a best seller about women and money. "It is more socially acceptable for women not to manage their money," she told the same interviewer. "But the Y chromosome is not a money management chromosome. In all the studies, if you control for earnings, age and experience, women are the same as men. At twenty-three, out in the working world staring at a 401(k) plan, they are equally confused. But if those women quit working, they will know less and less about finance, while the man, who keeps working, will know more and more."<sup>19</sup>

So it is our experience, not our gender, that predicts how we'll handle our retirement investments.

What about those enormous gender differences that some observers have found in the workplace (the subject of chapter 9)? Men, we hear, are competitive social climbers who seek advancement at every opportunity; women are cooperative team-builders who shun competition and may even suffer from a “fear of success.” But the pioneering study by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, reported in *Men and Women of the Corporation*, indicated that gender mattered far less than opportunity. When women had the same opportunities, networks, mentors, and possibilities for advancement, they behaved just as the men did. Women were not successful because they lacked opportunities, not because they feared success; when men lacked opportunities, they behaved in stereotypically “feminine” ways.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, take our experiences in the family, which I examine in chapter 6. Here, again, we assume that women are socialized to be nurturing and maternal, men to be strong and silent, relatively emotionally inexpressive arbiters of justice—that is, we assume that women do the work of “mothering” because they are socialized to do so. And again, sociological research suggests that our behavior in the family has somewhat less to do with gender socialization than with the family situations in which we find ourselves.

Research by sociologist Kathleen Gerson, for example, found that gender socialization was not very helpful in predicting women's family experiences. Only slightly more than half the women who were primarily interested in full-time motherhood were, in fact, full-time mothers; and only slightly more than half the women who were primarily interested in full-time careers had them. It turned out that marital stability, husbands' income, women's workplace experiences, and support networks were far more important than gender socialization in determining which women ended up full-time mothers and which did not.<sup>21</sup>

On the other side of the ledger, research by sociologist Barbara Risman found that despite a gender socialization that downplays emotional responsiveness and nurturing, most single fathers are perfectly capable of “mothering.” Single fathers do not hire female workers to do the typically female tasks around the house: They do those tasks themselves. In fact, Risman found few differences between single fathers and mothers (single or married) when it came to what they did around the house, how they acted with their children, or even in their children's emotional and intellectual development. Men's parenting styles were virtually indistinguishable from women's, a finding that led Risman to argue that “men can mother and that children are not necessarily better nurtured by women than by men.”<sup>22</sup>

These findings also shed a very different light on other research. For example, some recent researchers found significant differences in the amount of stress that women and men experience on an everyday basis. According to the researchers, women reported higher levels of stress and lower numbers of “stress-free” days than did men. David Almeida and Ronald Kessler sensibly concluded that this was not a biologically based difference, a signal of women's inferiority in handling stress, but rather an indication that women had more stress in their lives, because they had to juggle more family and work issues than did men.<sup>23</sup>

Almeida and Kessler's findings were reported with some fanfare in newspapers, which with few exceptions recounted new significant gender differences. But what Almeida and Kessler actually found was that women, as Kessler noted, "tend to the home, the plumber, their husband's career, their jobs, and oh yes, the kids." By contrast, for men, it's "How are things at work? The end."<sup>24</sup> And they found this by asking married couples, both husbands and wives, about their reactions to such "stressors." What do you think their findings would have been had they asked single mothers and single fathers the same questions? Do you think they would have found any significant gender differences at all? More likely, they would have found that trying to juggle the many demands of a working parent is likely to generate enormous stress both for men and for women. Again, it's the structure, not the gender, that generates the statistical difference.

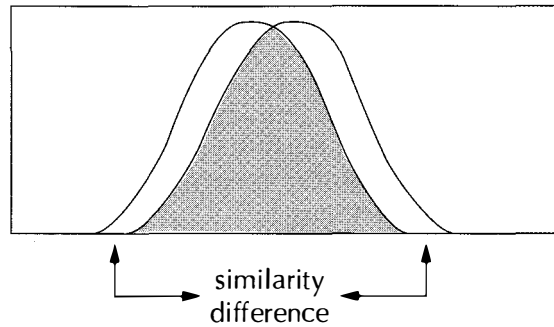
Based on all this research, you might conclude, as does Risman, that "if women and men were to experience identical structural conditions and role expectations, empirically observable gender differences would dissipate."<sup>25</sup> I am not fully convinced. There *are* some differences between women and men, after all. Perhaps, as this research suggests, those differences are not as great, decisive, or as impervious to social change as we once thought. But there are some differences. It will be my task in this book to explore both those areas where there appear to be gender differences but where there are, in fact, few or no differences, and those areas where gender differences are significant and decisive.

### THE MEANING OF MEAN DIFFERENCES

Few of the differences between women and men are "hardwired" into all males to the exclusion of all females, or vice versa. Although we can readily observe differences between women and men in rates of aggression, physical strength, math or verbal achievement, caring and nurturing, or emotional expressiveness, it is not true that all males and no females are aggressive, physically strong, and adept at math and science and that all females and no males are caring and nurturing, verbally adept, or emotionally expressive. What we mean when we speak of gender differences are mean differences, differences in the average scores obtained by women and men.

These mean scores tell us something about the differences between the two groups, but they tell us nothing about the distributions themselves, the differences *among* men or *among* women. Sometimes these distributions can be enormous: There are large numbers of caring or emotionally expressive men and of aggressive and physically strong women. (See figure 1.1.) In fact, in virtually all the research that has been done on the attributes associated with masculinity or femininity, the differences among women and among men are far greater than the mean differences between women and men. We tend to focus on the mean differences, but they may tell us far less than we think they do.

What we think they tell us, of course, is that women and men are different, from different planets. This is what I will call the "interplanetary theory of gender difference"—that the observed mean differences between women and men are decisive and that they come from the fact that women and men are biologically so physically different.



**Figure 1.1.** Schematic rendering of the overlapping distributions of traits, attitudes, and behaviors by gender. Although mean differences might be evident on many characteristics, these distributions suggest far greater similarity between women and men and far greater variability among men and among women.

For example, even the idea that we are from different planets, that our differences are deep and intractable, has a political dimension: To call the “other” sex the “opposite” sex obscures the many ways we are alike. As the anthropologist Gayle Rubin points out:

Men and women are, of course, different. But they are not as different as day and night, earth and sky, yin and yang, life and death. In fact from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else—for instance mountains, kangaroos, or coconut palms... Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities.<sup>26</sup>

The interplanetary theory of gender difference is important not because it’s right—in fact, it is wrong far more often than it is right—but because, as a culture, we seem desperately to *want* it to be true. That is, the real sociological question about gender is not the sociology of gender differences—explaining the physiological origins of gender difference—but rather the sociology of knowledge question that explores why gender difference is so important to us, why we cling to the idea of gender difference so tenaciously, why, I suppose, we shell out millions of dollars for books that “reveal” the deep differences between women and men but will probably never buy a book that says, “Hey, we’re all Earthlings!”

That, however, is the message of this book. Virtually all available research from the social and behavioral sciences suggests that women and men are not from Venus and Mars, but rather are both from planet Earth. We’re not opposite sexes, but neighboring sexes—we have far more in common with each other than we have differences. We pretty much have the same abilities and pretty much want the same things in our lives.

### **THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE AND DOMINATION**

Whether we believe that gender difference is biologically determined or is a cultural formation, the interplanetary theory of gender difference assumes that gender is a property of individuals, that is, that gender is a component of one’s identity. But this



is only half the story. I believe that individual boys and girls become gendered—that is, we learn the “appropriate” behaviors and traits that are associated with hegemonic masculinity and exaggerated femininity, and then we each, individually, negotiate our own path in a way that feels right to us. In a sense, we each “cut our own deal” with the dominant definitions of masculinity and femininity. That’s why we are so keenly attuned to, and so vigorously resist, gender stereotypes—because we believe that they do not actually encompass our experiences.

But we do not cut our own deal by ourselves in gender-neutral institutions and arenas. The social institutions of our world—workplace, family, school, politics—are also gendered institutions, sites where the dominant definitions are reinforced and reproduced and where “deviants” are disciplined. We become gendered selves in a gendered society.

Speaking of a gendered society is not the same thing as pointing out that rocket ships and skyscrapers bear symbolic relationships to a certain part of the male anatomy. Sometimes function takes precedence over symbolic form. (Do you really think women would explore outer space in a machine shaped like a bagel?) It is also only partially related to the way we use metaphors of gender to speak of other spheres of activity—the way, for example, the worlds of sports, sex, war, and work each appropriate the language of the other spheres.

When we say that we live in a gendered society we imply that the organizations of our society have evolved in ways that reproduce both the differences between women and men and the domination of men over women. Institutionally, we can see how the structure of the workplace is organized around demonstrating and reproducing masculinity: The temporal organization and the spatial organization of work both depend upon the separation of spheres (distance between work and home and the fact that women are the primary child-care providers).

As it did with respect to the invisibility of gendered identity, assuming institutional gender neutrality actually serves to maintain the gender politics of those institutions. And it underscores the way we often assume that if you allow individuals to express a wider range of gender behaviors, they’ll be able to succeed in those gender-neutral institutions. So we assume that the best way to eliminate gender inequality in higher education or in the workplace is to promote sameness—i.e., we’re unequal only because we’re different.

This, however, creates a political and personal dilemma for women in gendered institutions. It’s a no-win proposition for women when they enter the workplace, the military, politics, or sports—arenas that are already established to reproduce and sustain masculinity. To the extent that they become “like men” in order to succeed, they are seen as having sacrificed their femininity. Yet to the extent to which they refuse to sacrifice their femininity, they are seen as different, and thus gender discrimination is legitimate as the sorting of different people into different slots.<sup>27</sup> Women who succeed are punished for abandoning their femininity—rejected as potential partners, labeled as “dykes,” left off the invitation lists. The first women who entered the military or military colleges or even Princeton and Yale when these institutions went co-educational in the late 1960s were seen as being “less” feminine, as being unsuccessful as women. Yet had they been more “successful” as women, they would have been seen as less-capable soldiers or students.<sup>28</sup> Thus gender inequality creates a double bind for

women—a double bind that is based on the assumption of gender difference and the assumption of institutional gender neutrality.

There's a more personal side to this double bind. Often, men are perplexed by the way their wives have closets filled with clothes, yet constantly complain that they have “nothing to wear.” Men often find this behavior strange, probably the behavior of someone who must have come from another planet. After all, we men typically alternate among only three or four different colors of shirts and suits, which we match with perhaps five or six different ties. Navy blue, charcoal gray, black—what could be so difficult about getting dressed?

But women who work enter a gendered institution in which everything they wear “signifies” something. So they look at one business-like dress and tell themselves, “No, this is too frumpy. They'll never take me seriously as a woman in this dress!” So they hold up a slinkier and tighter outfit and think, “In this little number, all they'll see in me is a woman, and they'll never take me seriously as an employee.” Either way—corporate frump or sexy babe—women lose, because the workplace is, itself, gendered, and standards of success, including dressing for success, are tailored to the other sex.

Both difference and domination are produced and reproduced in our social interactions, in the institutions in which we live and work. Though the differences between us are not as great as we often assume, they become important in our expectations and observations. It will be my task in this book to examine those differences—those that are real and important—as well as to reveal those that are neither real nor important. I will explore the ways in which gender inequality provides the foundation for assumptions of gender difference. And, finally, I will endeavor to show the impact of gender on our lives—how we become gendered people living gendered lives in a gendered society.

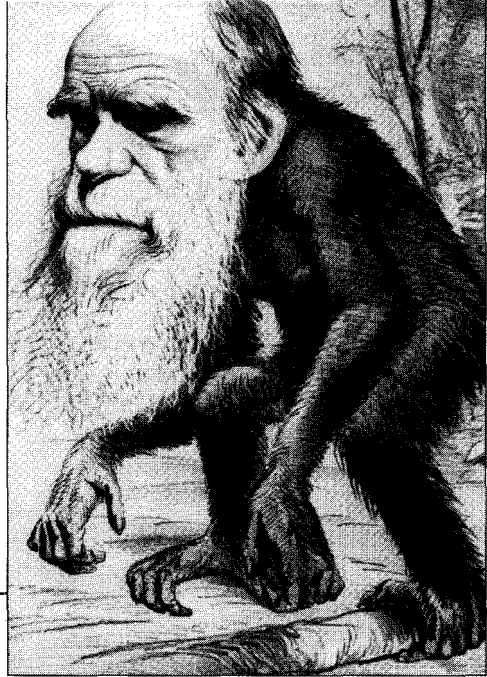


PART

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# Explanations of Gender





## Ordained by Nature

### *Biology Constructs the Sexes*

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature  
Nurture can never stick! On whom my pains,  
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost!

—SHAKESPEARE  
*The Tempest* (Act IV, Scene 1)

Oprah: “Do you think society will change if it were proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that you were born that way?”

Gay twin: “It would be easier...the acceptance, but you understand that people still don’t accept Blacks and Hispanics and handicapped...Gays are right in there with them... people don’t accept obese people.”

Oprah (chagrined): “I forgot about that. Let’s take a break.”

Aside from his exasperated cry of “women—what do they want?” Sigmund Freud’s most famous line is probably the axiom, “anatomy is destiny.” Though it’s not clear that Freud ever intended that it be taken literally, a large number of people believe that the differences in male and female anatomy are decisive and provide the basis for the differences in men’s and women’s experiences. One recent researcher proclaimed his belief that “the differences between the males and females of our species will ultimately be found in the cell arrangements and anatomy of the human brain.”<sup>1</sup> To biologists, the

source of human behavior lies neither in our stars nor in ourselves, as Caesar had suggested to Brutus—but rather in our cells.

Biological explanations hold a place of prominence in our explanations of both gender *difference* and gender *inequality*. First, biological explanations have the ring of “true” science to them: Because their theories are based on “objective scientific facts,” the arguments of natural scientists are extraordinarily persuasive. Second, biological explanations seem to accord with our own observations: Women and men *seem* so different to us most of the time—so different, in fact, that we often appear to be from different planets.

There’s also a certain conceptual tidiness to biological explanations, because the social arrangements between women and men (gender inequality) seem to stem directly and inevitably from the differences between us. Biological arguments reassure us that what *is* is what should be, that the social is natural. Finally, such reassurances tell us that these existing inequalities are not our fault, that no one is to blame, really. We cannot be held responsible for the way we act—hey, it’s biological! (Such claims are made by conservatives and liberals, by feminists and misogynists, and by homophobes and gay activists.) What’s more, if these explanations are true, no amount of political initiative, no amount of social spending, no great policy upheavals will change the relationships between women and men.

This chapter will explore some of the biological evidence that is presented to demonstrate the natural, biologically based differences between the sexes and the ways in which social and political arrangements (inequality) directly flow from those differences. Biological differences can tell us much about the ways in which men and women behave. The search for such differences can also tell us a lot about our culture—about what we want so desperately to believe, and why we want to believe it.

### **BIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES, THEN AND NOW**

The search for the biological origins of the differences between women and men is not new. What is new, at least for the past few centuries, is that scientists have come to play the central role in exploring the natural differences between males and females.

Prior to the nineteenth century, most explanations of gender difference had been the province of theologians. God had created man and woman for different purposes, and those reproductive differences were decisive. Thus, for example, did the Reverend John Todd warn against woman suffrage, which would “reverse the very laws of God,” and its supporters, who tried to convince woman that she would “find independence, wealth and renown in man’s sphere, when your only safety and happiness is patiently, lovingly, and faithfully performing the duties and enacting the relations of your own sphere.”<sup>2</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, under the influence of Darwin and the emerging science of evolutionary biology, scientists jumped into the debate, wielding their latest discoveries. Some argued that woman’s normal biological processes made her unfit for the public world of work and school. For example, in his book, *A Physician’s Counsels to Woman in Health and Disease* (1871), Dr. W. C. Taylor cautioned women to stay home and rest for at least five or six days a month:

We cannot too emphatically urge the importance of regarding these monthly returns as periods of ill health, as days when the ordinary occupations are to be suspended

or modified. . . Long walks, dancing, shopping, riding and parties should be avoided at this time of month invariably and under all circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

In his pathbreaking work, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Darwin had posed several questions. How do certain species come to be the way they are? Why is there such astonishing variety among those species? Why do some species differ from others in some ways and remain similar in other ways? He answered these questions with the law of natural selection. Species adapt to their changing environments. Those species that adapt well to their environments are reproductively successful, that is, their adaptive characteristics are passed on to the next generation, whereas those species that are less adaptive do not pass on their characteristics. Within any one species, a similar process occurs, and those individuals who are best suited to their environment pass on their genes to the next generation. Species are always changing, always adapting.

Such an idea was theologically heretical to those who believed that God had created all species, including human beings, intact and unchanging. And Darwin did believe that just as the species of the lower animal world evidence differences between males and females, so, too, do human beings. “Woman seems to differ from man in mental disposition, chiefly in her greater tenderness and lesser selfishness,” he wrote in *The Descent of Man*. Men’s competitiveness, ambition, and selfishness “seem to be his natural and unfortunate birthright. The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shown by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the uses of the senses and the hands.”<sup>4</sup>

No sooner had the biological differences between women and men been established as scientific fact than writers and critics declared all efforts to challenge social inequality and discrimination against women to be in violation of the “laws of nature.” Many writers argued that women’s efforts to enter the public sphere—to seek employment, to vote, to enter colleges—were misguided because they placed women’s social and political aspirations over the purposes for which their bodies had been designed. Women were not to be *excluded* from voting, from the labor force, or from higher education as much as they were, as the Reverend Todd put it, “to be exempted from certain things which men must endure.”<sup>5</sup> This position was best summed up by a participant in a debate about woman suffrage in Sacramento, California, in 1880:

I am opposed to woman’s suffrage [*sic*] on account of the burden it will place upon her. Her delicate nature has already enough to drag it down. Her slender frame, naturally weakened by the constant strain attendant upon her nature is too often racked [*sic*] by diseases that are caused by a too severe tax upon her mind. The presence of passion, love, ambition, is all too potent for her enfeebled condition, and wrecked health and early death are all too common.<sup>6</sup>

Social scientists quickly jumped on the biological bandwagon—especially social Darwinists, who shortened the time span necessary for evolution from millennia to one or two generations and who causally extended his range from ornithology to human beings. In their effort to legitimate social science by allying it with natural law, social Darwinists applied Darwin’s theory in ways its originator had never imagined, distorting his ideas about natural selection to claim decisive biological differences



among races, nations, families, and, of course, between women and men. For example, the eminent French sociologist Gustav LeBon, who would later become famous for his theory of the collective mind and the irrationality of the crowd, believed that the differences between women and men could be explained by their different brain structure. He wrote in 1879:

In the most intelligent races, as among the Parisians, there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed of male brains...All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women...recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult civilized man. They excel in fickleness, inconstancy, absence of thought and logic, and incapacity to reason. Without doubt, there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the average man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, of a gorilla with two heads...<sup>7</sup>

Much of the debate centered on whether or not women could be educated, especially in colleges and universities. One writer suggested that a woman “of average brain” could attain the same standards as a man with an average brain “only at the cost of her health, of her emotions, or of her morale.” Another prophesized that women would grow bigger and heavier brains and that their uteruses would shrink if they went to college. Perhaps the most famous social scientist to join this discussion was Edward C. Clarke, Harvard’s eminent professor of education. In his best-selling book *Sex in Education: or, A Fair Chance for the Girls* (1873), Clarke argued that women should be exempted from higher education because of the tremendous demands made upon their bodies by reproduction. If women went to college, Clarke predicted, they would fail to reproduce, and it would require “no prophet to foretell that the wives who are to be mothers in our republic must be drawn from transatlantic homes.”<sup>8</sup> (Clarke’s invocation of the threat to civilization posed by immigrants reproducing faster than native-born whites is common to the conflation of racism and sexism of the era.)

The evidence for such preposterous biological claims? Simple. It turned out that college-educated women were marrying less often and bearing fewer children than were non-college-educated women. It must have been those shriveled wombs and heavier brains. And it also appeared that 42 percent of all women admitted to mental institutions were college-educated, compared with only 16 percent of the men. Obviously, college education was driving women crazy. Today, of course, we might attribute this difference in fertility or in mental illness among college-educated women to enlarged opportunities or frustrated ambitions, respectively, but not to shrinking wombs. Clarke’s assertions remain a striking example of the use of correlational aggregate social science data for decidedly political purposes.

The implicit conservatism of such arguments was as evident at the beginning of the twentieth century as it is now. “How did woman first become subject to man as she is now all over the world?” asked James Long. “By her nature, her sex, just as the negro is and always will be, to the end of time, inferior to the white race, and therefore, doomed to subjection; but happier than she would be in any other condition, just because it is the law of her nature.”<sup>9</sup> Such sentiments echo back across the centuries when political leaders invoke biological differences as the basis for sex discrimination. When Newt Gingrich

became Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1995, he argued against women's participation in the military because "females have biological problems staying in a ditch for 30 days because they get infections and don't have upper body strength," whereas males "are basically little piglets, you drop them in the ditch, they roll around in it, doesn't matter... [M]ales are biologically driven to go out and hunt giraffes."<sup>10</sup>

Today, serious biological arguments generally draw their evidence from three areas of research: (1) evolutionary theory, from sociobiology to "evolutionary psychology," (2) brain research, and, (3) endocrinological research on sex hormones, before birth and again at puberty. The latter two areas of research are also used to describe the biologically based differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals, differences that are, as we shall see, often expressed in gender terms.<sup>11</sup>

### THE EVOLUTIONARY IMPERATIVE: FROM SOCIAL DARWINISM TO SOCIOBIOLOGY AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY

Evolutionary biologists since Darwin have abandoned the more obviously political intentions of the social Darwinists, but the development of a new field of sociobiology in the 1970s revived evolutionary arguments. Edward Wilson, a professor of entomology at Harvard, helped to found this school of thought, expanding his original field of expertise to include human behavior as well as bugs. All creatures, Wilson argued, "obey" the "biological principle," and all temperamental differences (personalities, cultures) derive from the biological development of creatures undergoing the pressure of evolutionary selection. The natural differences that result are the source of the social and political arrangements we observe today. Eventually, he confidently predicted, the social sciences and humanities would "shrink to specialized branches of biology."<sup>12</sup>

One major area that sociobiologists have stressed is the differences in male and female sexuality, which they believe to be the natural outgrowth of centuries of

## Oh Really?

Why are boys and girls color-coded? Why pink for girls and blue for boys? Did you know it was biological? After asking 171 British adult men and women to choose in a forced-choice experiment, two biologists proposed this grander evolutionary explanation: that women, as gatherers, developed a preference for red hues, like pink, because they needed to identify ripe berries and fruit. Further, women "needed to discriminate subtle changes in skin color due to emotional states and social-sexual signals" in "their roles as care-givers and 'empathizers.'" (p. R625).

Not only is this dreadful history—for centuries, boys and girls were dressed identically, and when they were first gender coded, in the 1870s and 1880s, in the U.S., the preference was pink and red for *boys* and blue for *girls*—but it's also incredibly bad evolutionary science. What sorts of "subtle changes in skin color" were we likely to find on the African savannah, where the original humans hunted and gathered? Do these biologists think that those early humans were white Englishmen and women, who blushed when embarrassed?

Source: Anya Hurlbert and Yazhu Ling, "Biological Components of Sex Differences in Color Preference" in *Current Biology*, vol. 17, issue 16, August 21, 2007.

evolutionary development. Evolutionary success requires that all members of a species consciously or unconsciously desire to pass on their genes. Thus males and females develop reproductive “strategies” to ensure that our own genetic code passes on to the next generation. Sociobiologists often use a language of intention and choice, referring to “strategies” that makes it sound as if our genes were endowed with instrumental rationality and that each of our cells acted in a feminine or masculine way. Thus they seem to suggest that the differences we observe between women and men today have come from centuries of advantageous evolutionary choices. As Wilson and fellow sociobiologist Richard Dawkins put it, “[F]emale exploitation begins here.” Culture has little to do with it, as Wilson argues, because “the genes hold culture on a leash.”<sup>13</sup>

Take, for example, the size and the number of the reproductive cells themselves. Add to that the relative cost to male and female in producing a healthy offspring, and—presto!—you have the differences between male and female sexual behavior at a typical college mixer this weekend. “He” produces billions of tiny sperm; “she” produces one gigantic ovum. For the male, reproductive success depends upon his ability to fertilize a large number of eggs. Toward this end, he tries to fertilize as many eggs as he can. Thus males have a “natural” propensity toward promiscuity. By contrast, females require only one successful mating before their egg can be fertilized, and therefore they tend to be extremely choosy about which male will be the lucky fellow. What’s more, females must invest a far greater amount of energy in gestation and lactation and have a much higher reproductive “cost,” which their reproductive strategies would reflect. Females, therefore, tend to be monogamous, choosing the male who will make the best parent. “A woman seeks marriage to monopolize not a man’s sexuality, but, rather, his political and economic resources, to ensure that her children (her genes) will be well provided for,” writes journalist Anthony Layng. As sociobiologist Donald Symons puts it, women and men have different “sexual psychologies”:

Since human females, like those of most animal species, make a relatively large investment in the production and survival of each offspring—and males can get away with a relatively small one—they’ll approach sex and reproduction, as animals do, in rather different ways from males. . . . Women should be more choosy and more hesitant, because they’re more at risk from the consequences of a bad choice. And men should be less discriminating, more aggressive and have a greater taste for variety of partners because they’re *less* at risk.

Not surprisingly, Symons notes, this is “what we find”:

Selection favored the basic male tendency to be aroused sexually by the sight of females. A human female, on the other hand, incurred an immense risk, in terms of time and energy, by becoming pregnant, hence selection favored the basic female tendency to discriminate with respect both to sexual partners and to the circumstances in which copulation occurred.<sup>14</sup>

The dilemma for these monogamous females, then, is how to extract parental commitment from these recalcitrant rogue males, who would much prefer to be out fertilizing other females than home with the wife and kids. Women’s strategy is to “hold out” for emotional, and therefore parental, commitment *before* engaging in sexual relations. Thus not only are women predetermined to be monogamous, but also they link

sexual behavior to emotional commitment, extracting from those promiscuous males all manner of promises of love and devotion before they will finally “put out.” Thus males are hardwired genetically to be promiscuous sexual predators, ever on the prowl for new potential sexual conquests, whereas females have a built-in biological tendency toward monogamy, fantasies of romantic love and commitment coupled with sexual behavior, and a certain sexual reticence that can be overcome only by chivalric male promises of fealty and fidelity.

Other evolutionary arguments examine other aspects of reproductive biology to spell out the differences between men and women and thereby explain the social inequality between them. For example, the separation of spheres seems to have a basis far back in evolutionary time. “In hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt and women stay at home. This strong bias persists in most agricultural and industrial societies, and, on that ground alone, appears to have a genetic origin,” writes Edward Wilson. “My own guess is that the genetic bias is intense enough to cause a substantial division of labor in the most free and most egalitarian of future societies.”<sup>15</sup> Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox emphasize the social requirements for the evolutionary transition to a hunting-and-gathering society. First, the hunting band must have solidarity and cooperation, which require bonding among the hunters. Women’s biology—especially their menstrual cycle—puts them at a significant disadvantage for such consistent cooperation, and the presence of women would disrupt the cooperation necessary among the men and insinuate competition and aggression. They also are possessed of a “maternal instinct.” Thus it would make sense for men to hunt and for women to remain back home raising the children.<sup>16</sup>

From such different reproductive strategies and evolutionary imperatives come different temperaments, the different personalities we observe in women and men. The newest incarnation of sociobiology is called “evolutionary psychology,” which declares an ability to explain psychological differences between women and men through their evolutionary trajectories. Men are understood to be more aggressive, controlling, and managing—skills that were honed over centuries of evolution as hunters and fighters. After an equal amount of time raising children and performing domestic tasks, women are said to be more reactive, more emotional, “programmed to be passive.”<sup>17</sup>

These differences lead us to completely different contemporary mating strategies as well. Psychologist David Buss surveyed more than ten thousand people from thirty-seven different cultures around the world and found strikingly similar things about what women and men want in a mate. It can’t be culturally specific if they all agree, can it? In every society, females placed a high premium on signs of economic prosperity, whereas men placed their highest premium on youth and beauty, whose signal traits were large breasts and ample hips—i.e., signs of fertility. Sexual selection maximizes reproductive success, right? Well, maybe. Actually, Indian *men* ranked being a good financial provider higher than women did in Finland, Great Britain, Norway, Spain, and Australia (which are, incidentally, among the most “gender equal” countries in the world). Does it interest you that although these traits were important, the single trait most highly valued by *both* women and men was love and kindness? Could it be that love, harmony, and kindness are even more important to our reproductive success than his sexual conquest and her monogamous

reticence—that, in essence, evolutionary success depends more on our similarities than our differences?<sup>18</sup>

Finally, these differences also enable scientists to try to explain such behaviors as interspecies violence and aggression. Sociobiologist David Barash combines sociobiology with New Age platitudes when he writes that “genes help themselves by being nice to themselves.” Unfortunately, this doesn’t necessarily mean being nice to others. Selfish genes do not know the Golden Rule. For example, Barash explains rape as a reproductive adaptation by men who otherwise couldn’t get a date. Following their study of scorpion flies and mallard ducks, Barash, Randy Thornhill, and other evolutionists argue that men who rape are fulfilling their genetic drive to reproduce in the only way they know how. “Perhaps human rapists, in their own criminally misguided way, are doing the best they can to maximize their fitness,” writes Barash. Rape, for men, is simply an “adaptive” reproductive strategy of the less successful male—sex by other means. If you can’t pass on your genetic material by seduction, then pass it on by rape.<sup>19</sup>

In their book *A Natural History of Rape*, Thornhill and Craig Palmer amplify these arguments and make wildly unfounded assertions in the process. Rape, they write, is “a natural, biological phenomenon that is a product of human evolutionary heritage.”<sup>20</sup> Males’ biological predisposition is to reproduce, and their reproductive success comes from spreading their seed as far and wide as possible; women are actually the ones with the power because they get to choose which males will be successful. “But getting chosen is not the only way to gain sexual access to females,” they write. “In rape, the male circumvents the females’ choice.”<sup>21</sup> Rape is the evolutionary mating strategy of losers, males who cannot otherwise get a date. Rape is an alternative to romance; if you can’t always have what you want, you take what you need.

Don’t blame the men, though—or even their genetic imperatives. It’s really women’s fault. “As females evolved to deny males the opportunity to compete at ovulation time, copulation with unwilling females became a feasible strategy for achieving copulation,” write Richard Alexander and K. M. Noonan. Women, then, are biologically programmed to “hold out”—but they better not do it too long. If women were only a little bit more compliant, men wouldn’t be forced to resort to rape as a reproductive tactic.<sup>22</sup>

### **EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY—A JUST-SO STORY**

Do these evolutionary arguments make sense? Does their evidence add up to basic, irreconcilable differences between women and men, made necessary by the demands of evolutionary adaptation? Although there is a certain intuitive appeal to these arguments—because they give our contemporary experiences the weight of history and science—there are simply too many convenient lapses in reasoning for us to be convinced.

The theory may tidily describe the intricate mating rituals of fruit flies or brown birds or *seem* applicable to an urban singles bar or the dating dynamics of high school and college students, but it is based on an interpretation of evidence that is selective and conforms to preconceived ideas. It is as if these sociobiologists observe what is normative—that men are more likely than women to separate love and sex, that men feel entitled to sexual contact with women, that men are more likely to be promiscuous—and read it back into our genetic coding. Such explanations always fall into teleological traps, reasoning backward to fill existing theoretical holes. It is so

because it is supposed to be so. Besides, the time span is too short. Can we explain each single sexual encounter by such grand evolutionary designs? I would bet that most of our conscious “strategies” at college mixers have more immediate goals than to ensure our reproductive success.

Some arguments go far beyond what the data might explain and into areas that are empirically untestable. Biologist Richard Lewontin, a passionate critic of sociobiology, argues that, “no evidence at all is presented for a genetic basis of these characteristics [religion, warfare, cooperation] and the arguments for their establishment by natural selection cannot be tested, since such arguments postulate hypothetical situations in human prehistory that are uncheckable.” And fellow evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould denies that there is “any direct evidence for genetic control of specific human social behavior.”<sup>23</sup> “Genes don’t cause behaviors,” writes the neuroprimateologist Robert Sapolsky. “Sometimes, they influence them.”<sup>24</sup>

Some sociobiological arguments seem to assume that only one interpretation is possible from the evidence. But there could be others. Psychologists Carol Tavaris and Carole Wade, for example, ask why parents—women or men—would “invest” so much time and energy in their children when they could be out having a good time. Although sociobiologists argue that we are “hardwired” for such altruistic behavior, because our children are the repository of our genetic material, Tavaris and Wade suggest that it may be simple economic calculation: In return for taking care of our offspring when they are young and dependent, we expect them to take care of us when we are old and dependent—a far more compact and tidy explanation.<sup>25</sup>

Some sociobiological arguments are based on selective use of data, ignoring those data that might be inconvenient. Which species should we use as the standard of measurement? Among chimpanzees and gorillas, for example, females usually leave home and transfer to new tribes, leaving the males at home with their mothers; among baboons, macaques, and langurs, however, it’s the males who leave home to seek their fortune elsewhere. So which sex has the wanderlust, the natural predisposition to leave home? Sociobiologists tend to favor male-dominant species to demonstrate the ubiquity of male dominance. But there are other species. For example, baboons seem to be

### Oh Really?

Sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists use a most gendered anthropomorphic language of motivation, cognition, and activity itself to describe our tiniest of cells. You’ve probably imagined sperm as hardy warriors swimming purposively upstream, against the current, on a suicide mission to fertilize that egg, or die. Here’s what it *actually* looks like:

[A] wastefully huge swarm of sperm weakly flops along, its members bumping into walls and flailing aimlessly through thick strands of mucus. Eventually, through sheer odds of pinball-like bouncing... a few sperm end up close to an egg. As they mill around, the egg selects one and reels it in, pinning it down in spite of its efforts to escape. It’s no contest, really. The gigantic hardy egg yanks the tiny sperm inside, distills out the chromosomes, and sets out to become an embryo.

Source: David Freedman, “The Aggressive Egg” in *Discover*, June 1, 1992.

female-dominant, with females determining the stability of the group and deciding which males are trustworthy enough to be their “friends.” Then there is the female chimpanzee. She has sex with lots of different males, often up to fifty times a day during peak estrus. She flirts, seduces, and does everything she can to attract males—whom she then abandons and moves on to the next customer. Would we say that such evidence demonstrates that females are genetically programmed toward promiscuity and males toward monogamy? Bonobos, our closest primate relatives, are remarkably communal, generous, and egalitarian—and very sexy.<sup>26</sup> And sociobiologists tend to ignore other behavior among primates. For example, sexual contact with same-sex others is “part of the normal sexual repertoire of all animals, expressed variously over the lifetime of an individual.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, same-sex sexual contact is ubiquitous in the animal kingdom—ranging from bighorn sheep and giraffes, both of which have what can be described only as gay orgies, to dolphins, whales, manatees, and Japanese macaques and bonobos, which bond through “lesbian” sexual choices.<sup>28</sup> But few posit a natural predisposition toward homosexuality. “Simple minded analogies between human behavior and animal behavior are risky at best, irresponsibly goofy at worst,” writes neurobiologist Simon LeVay, himself author of some rather risky, at best, studies on gay brains (discussed later).<sup>29</sup>

Some arguments are just plain wrong in light of empirical evidence. Take the argument about how women’s menstrual cycle debilitates them so that they were inevitably and correctly left behind in the transition to hunting and gathering. Katherine Dalton’s research on English schoolgirls showed that 27 percent got poorer test scores just before menstruation than at ovulation. (She does not say how much worse they did.) But 56 percent showed no change in test grades, and 17 percent actually performed better at premenstruation. And what about that “maternal instinct”? How do we explain the enormous popularity of infanticide as a method of birth control throughout Western history and the fact that it was women who did most of the baby killing? Infanticide has probably been the most commonly practiced method of birth control throughout the world. One historian reported that infanticide was common in ancient Greece and Rome and that “every river, dung heap and cesspool used to be littered with dead infants.” In 1527, a priest commented that “the latrines resound with the cries of children who have been plunged into them.”<sup>30</sup>

And finally, what is one to make of the argument that rape is simply sex by other means for reproductively unsuccessful males? Such arguments ignore the fact that most rapists are not interested in sex but rather in humiliation and violence, motivated more by rage than by lust. Most rapists have regular sex partners, quite a few are married. Many women well outside of reproductive age, either too young or too old, are raped. And why would some rapists hurt and even murder their victims, thus preventing the survival of the very genetic material that they are supposed to be raping in order to pass on? And why would some rapists be homosexual rapists, passing on their genetic material to those who could not possibly reproduce? And what about rape in prison? Using theories of selfish genes or evolutionary imperatives to explain human behavior cannot take us very far.

“[S]election favored males who mated frequently,” argue Thornhill and Palmer; therefore, “rape increased reproductive success.”<sup>31</sup> But why should this be true? Might it not also be the case that being hardwired to be good lovers and devoted fathers enabled

us to be reproductively successful? One might argue that selection favored males who mated *well*, because successful mating is more than spreading of seed. After all, human males are the only primates for whom skillful lovemaking, enhancing *women's* pleasure, is normative, at least in many societies. Being an involved father probably assured reproductive success far better than did rape. After all, babies are so precious, so fragile that they need extraordinary—and extraordinarily long!—care and devotion. Infants conceived during rape would have a far lower chance of survival, which is probably one reason why we invented love. Infants conceived in rape might well have been subject to infanticide—historically the most common form of birth control before the modern era.

Is rape “natural”? Of course, it is. As is *any* behavior or trait found among human primates. If it exists in nature, it's natural. Some “natural” beverages contain artificial—“social”—additives that give them their color, their texture, their taste, their “meaning” or “significance.” This is equally true of rape. Telling us that it is natural tells us nothing about it except that it is found in nature.

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology provide us with what Rudyard Kipling called a “just-so story”—an account that uses some evidence to tell us how, for example, an elephant got its trunk, or a tiger its stripes. Just-so stories are children's fables, understood by the reader to be fictions, but convenient, pleasant, and, ultimately, useful fictions.

Could we not use the same evidence and construct a rather different just-so story? Try this little thought experiment. Let's take the same evidence about sperm and eggs, about reproductive strategies, about different levels of parental investment that the sociobiologists use, and add a few others. Let's also remember that human females are the only primate females who do not have specified periods of estrus, that is, they are potentially sexually receptive at any time of their reproductive cycle, including when they are incapable of conception. What could be the evolutionary reproductive “strategy” of this? And let's also remember that the human clitoris plays no part whatsoever in human reproduction but is solely oriented toward sexual pleasure. And don't forget that in reality most women do not experience peaks of sexual desire during ovulation (which is what evolutionary biologists would predict, because women must ensure reproductive success) but actually just before and just after menstruation (when women are almost invariably infertile, though the ratio of female to male hormones is lowest).<sup>32</sup> And finally, let's not forget that when a baby is born, the identity of the mother is obvious, though that of the father is not. Until very recently, with the advent of DNA tests, fathers could never be entirely certain that the baby was theirs; after all, how do they know their partner had not had sexual contact with another male?

From this evidence one might adduce that human females are uniquely equipped biologically—indeed, that it is their sexual strategy—to enjoy sex simply for its physical pleasure and not for its reproductive potential. And if the reproductive goal of the female is to ensure the survival of her offspring, then it would make sense for her to deceive as many males as possible into thinking that the offspring was theirs. That way, she could be sure that all of them would protect and provide for the baby because none of them could risk the possibility of his offspring's death and the obliteration of his genetic material. So might not women's evolutionary “strategy” be promiscuity?<sup>33</sup>



One more bit of evidence is the difference between male and female orgasm. Whereas male orgasm is clearly linked to reproductive success, female orgasm seems to have been designed solely for pleasure; it serves no reproductive function at all. According to Elisabeth Lloyd, a philosopher of science at Indiana University, the capacity for female orgasm may be a holdover from parallel fetal development in the first eight or nine weeks of life. But its persistence may be that orgasm is a reproductive strategy for promiscuous females. Sexual pleasure and orgasm may encourage females to mate frequently and with multiple partners until they have an orgasm. The males, on the other hand, couldn't be sure the offspring was *not* theirs, so they would struggle to protect and provide. Thus, female orgasm might be part of women's evolutionary strategy—and making sure females did *not* enjoy sex too much might be males' evolutionary response!<sup>34</sup>

Some of these issues seem to be present among the Bari people of Venezuela, where female promiscuity ensures that a woman's offspring stand a better chance of survival. Among the Bari, the man who impregnates the female is considered the primary father, but other men with whom the mother also has sex during her pregnancy consider themselves secondary fathers and spend a good deal of time making sure the child has enough fish or meat to eat.<sup>35</sup> And it may be not that far off from what we do as well. One recent study found that women reported that their partners increased their attentiveness and “monopolization” behavior—calling them often to check on their whereabouts, for example—just as they began to ovulate. But the women found that they fantasized far more about cheating on their partners at the same time. (They reported no increase whatever in sexual thoughts about their partners—so much for their evolutionary predisposition toward fidelity.) Although this suggests that the men had good reason to be more guarding and jealous, it also suggests that women “instinctively want to have sex with as many men as possible to ensure the genetic quality of their offspring, whereas men want to ensure that their own genes get reproduced,” according to a journalist reporting on the story. Equally selfish genes and equally a “war between the sexes”—but one with completely different interpretation.<sup>36</sup>

Another biological fact about women might make life even more confusing for males seeking to determine paternity. Barbara McClintock's research about women's menstrual cycles indicated that in close quarters, women's cycles tend to become increasingly synchronous; that is, over time, women's cycles will tend to converge with those of their neighbors and friends. (McClintock noticed this among her roommates and friends while an undergraduate at Harvard in the early 1970s.)<sup>37</sup> What's more, in cultures where artificial light is not used, all the women will tend to ovulate at the full moon and menstruate at the new moon. Although this might be an effective method of birth control in nonliterate societies (to prevent pregnancy, you must refrain from sex when the moon approaches fullness), it also suggests that unless women were controlled, paternity could not be established definitively.

If males were as promiscuous as females they would end up rather exhausted and haggard from running around hunting and gathering for all those babies who might *or might not* be their own. How were they to know, after all? In order to ensure that they did not die from exhaustion, males might “naturally” tend toward monogamy, extracting from women promises of fidelity before offering up a lifetime of support and protection to the potential offspring from those unions. Such males might invent ideals

of female chastity, refuse to marry (sexually commit to) women who were not virgins, and develop ideologies of domesticity that would keep women tied to the household and children to prevent them from indulging in their “natural” disposition toward promiscuity.

In fact, there is some persuasive evidence on this front. Because getting pregnant is often difficult (it takes the average couple three or four months of regular intercourse to become pregnant), being a faithful and consistent partner would be a far better reproductive strategy for a male. “Mate guarding” would enable him to maximize his chances of impregnating the woman and minimize the opportunities for other potential sperm bearers.<sup>38</sup>

Of course, I’m not suggesting that this interpretation supplant the one offered by evolutionary psychologists. But the fact that one can so easily use the exact same biological evidence to construct an entirely antithetical narrative suggests that we should be very careful when the experts tell us there is only one interpretation possible from these facts. “Genes do not shout commands to us about our behavior,” writes the celebrated ecologist Paul Ehrlich. “At the very most, they whisper suggestions.”<sup>39</sup>

### “HIS” BRAIN AND “HER” BRAIN

Biologists have also focused on the brain to explain the differences between women and men. This approach, too, has a long history. In the eighteenth century, experts measured women’s brains and men’s brains and argued that, because women’s brains were smaller and lighter, they were inferior. Of course, it later turned out that women’s brains were not smaller and lighter relative to body size and weight and thus were not predictive of any cognitive differences. The late nineteenth century was the first heyday of brain research, as researchers explored that spongy and gelatinous three-pound blob in order to discover the differences between whites and blacks, Jews and non-Jews, immigrants and “normal” or “real” Americans, criminals and law-abiding citizens. For example, the great sociologist Emile Durkheim succumbed to such notions when he wrote, “with the advance of civilization the brain of the two sexes has increasingly developed differently... [T]his progressive gap between the two may be due both to the considerable development of the male skull and to a cessation and even a regression in the growth of the female skull.” And another researcher argued that the brain of the average “grown-up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child, the female, and the senile White.” (One can only speculate where this put older black women.) But despite the fact that none of these hypothesized differences turned out to have any scientific merit, they all satisfied political and racist assumptions.<sup>40</sup>

Brain research remains a particularly fertile field of study, and scientists continue their search for differences between women and men in their brains. One writes that “many of the differences in brain function between the sexes are innate, biologically determined, and relatively resistant to change through the influences of culture.” Popular books proclaim just how decisive these differences are. The male brain is “not so easily distracted by superfluous information”; it is a “tidier affair” than the female brain, which appears “less able to separate emotion from reason.”<sup>41</sup> (Notice that these statements did not say—though they easily might have, based on the same evidence—that

the female brain is capable of integrating *more* diverse sources of information and *better* able to synthesize feelings and thought.)

That brain research fits neatly (a male brain trait?) into preconceived ideas about men's and women's roles is hardly a coincidence. In most cases, brain researchers (like many other researchers) find exactly what they are looking for, and what they are looking for are the brain-based differences that explain the observable behavioral differences between adult women and men. One or two historical examples should suffice. The "science" of craniology was developed in the late nineteenth century to record and measure the effect of brain differences among different groups. But the scientists could never agree on exactly which measures of the brain to use. They *knew* that men's brains had to be shown to be superior, but different tests yielded different results. For example, if one used the ratio of brain surface to body surface, then men's brains would "win"; but if one used the ratio of brain weight to body weight, then women's brains would appear superior. No scientist could rely on such ambiguity: More decisive methods had to be found to demonstrate that men's brains are superior.<sup>42</sup>

Test scores were no better as indicators. At the turn of the twentieth century, women were found to be scoring higher on comprehensive examinations at New York University. Because scientists "knew" that women are not as smart as men, some other explanation had to be sought. "After all, men are more intellectual than women, examination papers or no examination papers," commented the dean of the college, R. Turner. "Women have better memories and study harder, that's all. In tasks requiring patience and industry women win out. But when a man is both patient and industrious he beats a woman any day." (It is interesting to see that women's drive, ambition, and industriousness were used against them but that men were not faulted for impulsiveness, impatience, and laziness.) In the 1920s, when IQ tests were invented, women scored higher on those tests as well. So the experimenters changed the questions.<sup>43</sup>

Contemporary brain research has focused on three areas: (1) the differences between right hemisphere and left hemisphere, (2) the differences in the tissue that connects those hemispheres, and (3) the ways in which males and females use different parts of their brains for similar functions.<sup>44</sup>

Some scientists have noticed that the right and left hemispheres of the brain seem to be associated with different cognitive functions and abilities. Right-hemisphere dominance is associated with visual and spatial abilities, such as the ability to conceive of objects in space. Left-hemisphere dominance is associated with more practical functions, such as language and reading. Norman Geschwind and Peter Behan, for example, observed that sex differences begin in the womb when the male fetus begins to secrete testosterone that washes over the brain, selectively attacking parts of the left hemisphere and slowing its development. Thus, according to Geschwind, males tend to develop "superior right hemisphere talents, such as artistic, musical, or mathematical talent." Geschwind believes that men's brains are more lateralized, with one half dominating over the other, whereas women's brains are less lateralized, with both parts interacting more than in men's.<sup>45</sup>

One minor problem with this research, though, is that scientists can't seem to agree on which it is "better" to have and, not so coincidentally, which side of the brain dominates for which sex. In fact, they keep changing their minds about which hemisphere

is superior and then, of course, assigning that superior one to men. Originally, it was the *left* hemisphere that was supposed to be the repository of reason and intellect, whereas the right hemisphere was the locus of mental illness, passion, and instinct. So males were thought to be overwhelmingly more left-brained than right-brained. By the 1970s, though, scientists had determined that the truth lay elsewhere and that the right hemisphere was the source of genius, talent, creativity, and inspiration, whereas the left hemisphere was the site of ordinary reasoning, calculation, and basic cognitive function. Suddenly males were hailed as singularly predisposed toward right-brainedness. One neuroscientist, Ruth Bleier, reanalyzed Geschwind and Behan's data and found that in over five hundred fetal brains from ten to forty-four weeks of gestation, the authors had found no significant sex differences—this despite the much-trumpeted testosterone bath.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps it wasn't which half of the brain dominates, but rather the degree to which the brain was lateralized—that is, had a higher level of differentiation between the two hemispheres—that determined sex differences. Buffery and Gray found that female brains were more lateralized than male brains, which, they argued, interfered with spatial functioning and made women less capable at spatial tasks. That same year, Levy found that female brains were *less* lateralized than male brains, and so he argued that *less* lateralization interferes with spatial functioning. (There is virtually no current evidence for either of these positions, but that has not stopped most writers from believing Levy's argument.)<sup>47</sup> One recent experiment shows how the desperate drive to demonstrate difference actually leads scientists to misinterpret their own findings. In 1997, a French researcher, Jean Christophe Labarthe, tried to demonstrate sex differences in visual and spatial abilities. Two-year-old boys and girls were asked to build a tower and a bridge. For those of average birth weight or better (greater than 2,500 grams), there was no difference whatever in ability to build a tower, although 21 percent of the boys and only 8 percent of the girls could build a bridge. For children whose birth weight was less than 2,500 grams, though, there were no differences for either skill. From this skimpy data, Labarthe concludes that boys are better at bridge-building than girls—instead of the far more convincing (if less mediagenic) finding that birth weight affects visual and spatial functioning.<sup>48</sup>

Some research suggests that males use only half their brains while performing some verbal tasks, such as reading or rhyming, whereas females draw on both sides of their brains. A recent experiment reveals as much about our desire for difference as about difference itself. Researchers from the Indiana University School of Medicine measured brain activity of ten men and ten women as they listened to someone read a John Grisham thriller. A majority of the men showed exclusive activity on the left side of their brains, whereas the majority of the women showed activity on both sides of the brain. Although some might suggest that this provides evidence to women who complain that their husbands are only “half-listening” to them, the study mentions little about what the minority of males or females were doing—especially when the total number was only ten to begin with. Besides, what if they were listening instead to a Jane Austen novel? Might the males have “needed” both sides of their brain to figure out a plot that was a bit less action-packed? Would the females have been better able to relax that side of their brain that has to process criminal intrigue and murder?<sup>49</sup>

If these tacks weren't convincing, perhaps both males and females use both halves of their brains but use them *differently*. In their popular book detailing these brain differences, Jo Durden-Smith and Diane deSimone suggest that in the female left hemisphere, language tends to serve as a vehicle for communication, whereas for males that hemisphere is a tool for more visual-spatial tasks, like analytical reasoning. Similarly, they argue, in the right hemisphere males assign more neural space to visual-spatial tasks, whereas females have more room left over for other types of nonverbal communication skills, such as emotional sensitivity and intuition.<sup>50</sup>

But don't the differences in mathematical ability and reading comprehension provide evidence of different sides of the brain being more dominant among females and males? Although few would dispute that different sides of the brain account for different abilities, virtually all humans, both men and women, use both sides of their brains to reasonably good effect. If so, argues the neuropsychiatrist Jerre Levy, "then males may be at a double disadvantage in their emotional life. They may be emotionally less sophisticated. And because of the difficulty they may have in communicating between their two hemispheres, they may have restricted verbal access to their emotional world."<sup>51</sup>

It is true that males widely outnumber females at the genius end of the mathematical spectrum. But does that mean that males are, on average, more mathematically capable and females more verbally capable? Janet Hyde, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, has conducted a massive amount of research on this question. She reviewed 165 studies of verbal ability that included information about over 1.4 million people and included writing, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. She found no gender differences in verbal ability. But when she analyzed one hundred studies of mathematical ability, representing the testing of nearly four million students, she did find some modest gender differences. In the general studies, females outperformed males in mathematics, except in those studies designed only for the most precocious individuals.<sup>52</sup> What Hyde and her colleagues—and virtually every single study ever undertaken—found is that there is a far greater range of differences *among* males and *among* females than there is *between* males and females. That is to say that the variance within the group far outweighs the variance between groups, despite the possible differences between the mean scores of the two groups.

But what if it's not the differences between the hemispheres, or even that males and females use the same hemispheres differently? Perhaps it's the connections *between* the hemispheres. Some researchers have explored the bundle of fibers known as the "corpus callosum" that connects the two hemispheres and carries information between them. A subregion of this connecting network, known as the "splenium," was found by one researcher to be significantly larger and more bulbous in shape in females. This study of fourteen brains at autopsy suggested that this size difference reflected less hemispheric lateralization in females than in males and that this affected visual and spatial functioning. But subsequent research failed to confirm this finding. One researcher found no differences in the size of the corpus callosum between males and females. What's more, in magnetic resonance imaging tests on living men and women, no differences were found between women and men.<sup>53</sup>

But that doesn't stop some popular writers from dramatic and facile extrapolation. Here's Robert Pool, from his popular work, *Eve's Rib*: "Women have better verbal skills

than men on average; the splenium seems to be different in women and men, in shape if not in size; and the size of the splenium is related to verbal ability, at least in women.” And a recent popular book by psychologist Michael Gurian claims that only females with “boys’ brains” can grow up to be architects because girls’ brains are organized to promote nurturing, the love and caring for children. Not only is such a statement insulting to women—as if mathematical reasoning and spatial ability were somehow “beyond” them—but also it’s insulting to men, especially to fathers who seem to be fully capable of nurturing children.<sup>54</sup>

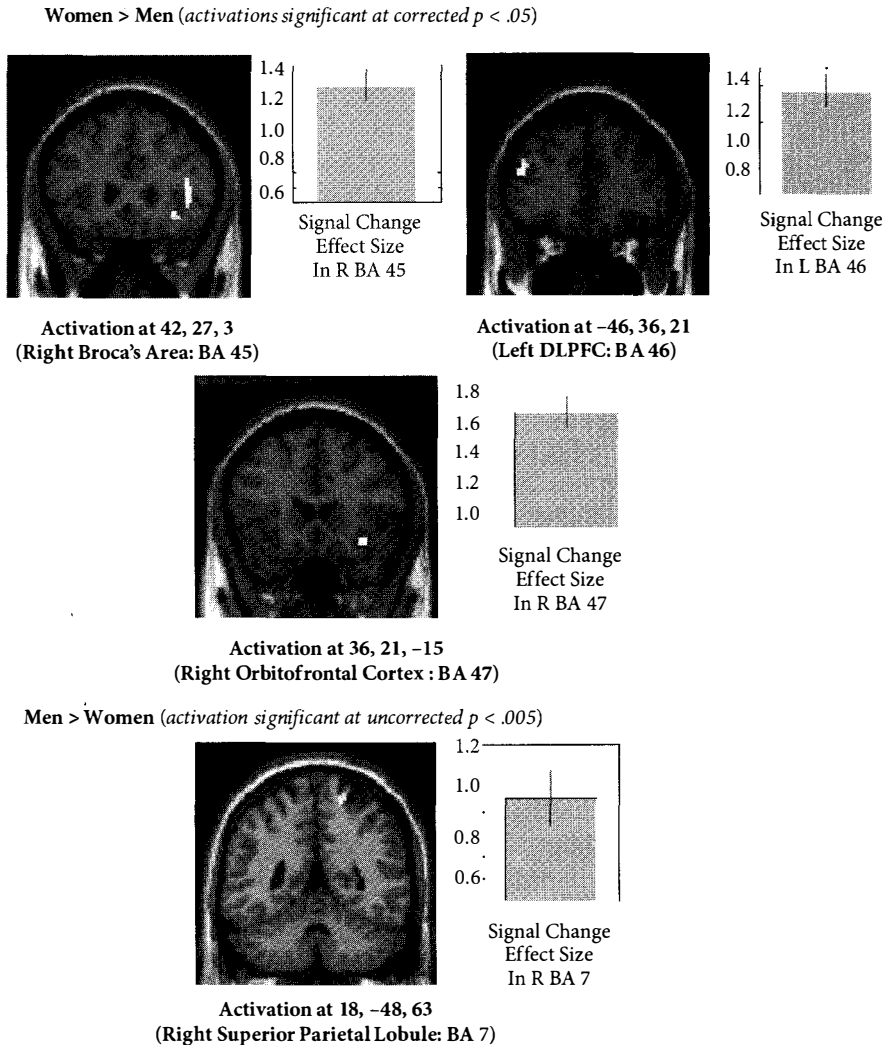
But that’s more or less typical. These sorts of apparent differences make for some pretty strange claims, especially about brain chemistry. For example, because boys’ brains secrete slightly less serotonin, on average, than girls’ brains, Michael Gurian claims that boys are “more impulsive” and “not as calm” as girls are in large classrooms. Although the variation among boys and among girls is significantly larger than any small difference between males and females, Gurian has no problem recommending educational policies that would “honor” that impulsivity. Even more astonishing is his claim, often echoed by John Gray, that during sex, males have a rush of oxytocin, a chemical that is linked to feelings of pleasure. In the throes of that “bonding hormone,” a man is likely to blurt out “I love you,” but it is only the effect of the chemical. If you’re wondering why he doesn’t call the next day, it’s because the hormone’s effect has worn off, not because, having scored, he’s looking for the exit.<sup>55</sup>

There is no shortage of crackpots when it comes to pseudoscientific explanations of biological difference. One of my recent favorites is that girls tend to see the details of experiences, and boys see the whole but not the details (girls don’t see the forest, but the trees; boys see the opposite) is because the “crockus” is four times larger in boys than in girls. An educational consultant and college instructor named Dan Hodgins has made a career of seminar and professional development presentations out of this claim. Except it turns out to be a complete fiction. There is no such area of the brain, nor is there any Dr. Alfred Crockus, nor even a Boston Medical University Hospital, where he supposedly made this discovery. That Mr. Hodgins is invited to speak at reputable venues only demonstrates how desperate we often are to find differences, even when they don’t exist. A group of disgruntled scientists has now created the Dr. Alfred Crockus Award for the Misuse of Neuroscience. Maybe the phrase should be changed to “blinded by pseudoscience.”<sup>56</sup>

The scientific evidence actually points in the other direction. In males, the amygdala, an almond-shaped part of the brain that responds to emotionally arousing information, is somewhat larger than it is in females. The neurons in this region, associated with emotions, make more numerous connections in males than in females, which produce some differences in the ways males and females react to stress. In one experiment, German researchers removed the newborn pups of degus, South American rodents akin to North American prairie dogs—an experience that is quite unsettling. The researchers measured the amount of serotonin in the pups. (Serotonin, a neurotransmitter, is a key chemical in mediating emotional behavior. Prozac and other selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors antidepressants increase serotonin functioning by inhibiting its reabsorption.) When the researchers allowed the pups to hear their mothers’ calls during the separation, the males’ serotonin levels rose, whereas the females’

levels declined—that is, the females felt more anxiety, and their behavior was less calm and orderly during such a period of separation.<sup>57</sup>

Although this experiment might be interpreted to suggest why females are more often diagnosed with depression than are males—less serotonin to begin with and more reabsorbed into the brain—it also pays no attention to the different ways our cultures prescribe for males and females to express anxiety and cope with stress. If you tell one group, from Day 1, that the way to handle stress and anxiety is to withdraw quietly, and you tell the other group that the only way to handle stress is to be loud and rambunctiously aggressive, it's a good guess that they will, by and large, follow orders. Which



**Figure 2.1.** In Direct Comparisons of Women and Men, Significant Positive Activations and Effect Sizes Regarding Signal Intensity Changes in Working Memory with Interference (Q3A-INT) versus Simple Attention (QA). Courtesy of Jill M. Golden, Professor of Psychiatry and Medicine of Harvard Medical School.

may explain why depression is more likely to be diagnosed among girls and anxiety and aggression disorders more likely among boys.

Besides, the scientists themselves still don't agree. For example, one recent brain study at UC Irvine found differences in gray matter (which represents information processing centers) and white matter (which represents the connections between these centers) in males and females. Males had about 6.5 times more gray matter than females, and females had about 10 times more white matter than males. On the other hand, Simon Baron-Cohen, a British brain researcher notes that the 9 percent difference in cerebrum size is due to the "larger total volume of white matter in men." Yet no one makes any claims that these differences lead to differences in general intelligence; indeed, the Irvine scientists insist there are none. Gray and white matter may be different, but the difference doesn't really make much of a difference.<sup>58</sup> Even neuropsychologist Doreen Kimura understands that "in the larger comparative context, the similarities between human males and females far outweigh the differences." And Jonathan Beckwith, professor of microbiology and molecular genetics at Harvard Medical School, argues that "[e]ven if they found differences, there is absolutely no way at this point that they can make a connection between any differences in brain structure and any particular behavior pattern or any particular aptitude."<sup>59</sup>

If there is no evidence for these arguments, why do they persist? One brain researcher, Marcel Kinsbourne, suggests that it is "because the study of sex differences is not like the rest of psychology. Under pressure from the gathering momentum of feminism, and perhaps in backlash to it, many investigators seem determined to discover that men and women 'really' are different. It seems that if sex differences do not exist, then they have to be invented."<sup>60</sup>

### THE GAY BRAIN

One of the most interesting and controversial efforts by scientists who study the biological origins of behavior has been the search for biological origins of sexual orientation. Recent research on brain structure and endocrinological research on hormones have suggested a distinctly homosexual "essence," which will emerge regardless of the cultural conditions that shape its opportunities and experiences. This research on the origins of sexual *orientation* is related to research on the basis of sex differences between women and men because, culturally, we tend to understand sexuality in terms of gender. Gender stereotypes dominate the discussion of sexual orientation; we may assume, for example, that gay men are not "real" men, i.e., are not sufficiently masculine, identify with women, and even adopt feminine affects and traits. Similarly, we may assume that lesbians are insufficiently feminine, identify with and imitate men's behaviors, etc. Homosexuality, our stereotypes tell us, is a *gender* "disorder."<sup>61</sup>

We have a century-long legacy upon which we draw such stereotypic ideas. Homosexuality emerged as a distinct identity in the late nineteenth century, when it was regarded as an "inborn, and therefore irrepressible drive," according to one Hungarian physician. Earlier, there were homosexual *behaviors*, of course, but identity did not emerge from nor inhere in those behaviors. By the turn of the twentieth century, though, "the homosexual" was characterized by a form of "interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul," writes Foucault. "The sodomite had been a temporary



aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” Since Freud’s era, we have assumed that male homosexuality, manifested by effeminacy, and lesbianism, manifested by masculine affect, might not be innate but are, nonetheless, intractable products of early childhood socialization and that differences between gays and straights, once established, prove the most telling in their lives’ trajectories.<sup>62</sup>

In recent decades, biological research has emerged as central in the demonstration of the fundamental and irreducible differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals. And, it should not surprise us that researchers have found what they hoped to find—that homosexual men’s brains and hormone levels more closely resemble those of females than those of heterosexual males. Science, again, has attempted to prove that the stereotypes of gay men and lesbians are based not in cultural fears and prejudices, but in biological fact. For example, in the 1970s, Dorner and his associates found that homosexual men possess a “predominantly female-differentiated brain,” which is caused by a “deficiency” of androgen during the hypothalamic organizational phase in prenatal life and which may be activated to homosexual behavior by normal or about-normal androgen levels in adulthood.<sup>63</sup>

More recently, Simon LeVay focused on the structure of the brain in an effort to uncover the etiology of homosexuality. Hoping that science can demonstrate “the origins of sexual orientation at a cellular level,” LeVay gives no credence to environmental determination of sexuality. “If there are environmental influences, they operate very early in life, at the fetal or early-infancy stages, when the brain is still putting itself together,” he argues. “I’m very much skeptical of the idea that sexual orientation is a cultural thing.” LeVay noticed that, among primates, experimental lesions in the medial zone of the hypothalamus of monkeys did not impair sexual functioning but did suppress mounting attempts by the male monkeys on female monkeys. He also noticed that the size of this region of the brain is different in men and women. In his experiment, LeVay examined the brain tissues of forty-one deceased people. Nineteen of these had died of AIDS and were identified as part of the risk group “homosexual and bisexual men”; sixteen other men were presumed to be heterosexual because there was no evidence to the contrary (six had died of AIDS and the other ten from other causes); and six were women who were presumed heterosexual (one had died of AIDS). These brains were treated and compared. Three of the four sections revealed no differences, but a fourth section, the anterior hypothalamus, a region about the size of a grain of sand, was found to be different among the groups. LeVay found that the size of this area among the presumably heterosexual men was approximately twice the size of that area for the women and the presumably gay men.<sup>64</sup>

But several problems in his experiments give us pause. LeVay and his colleagues failed to measure the cell number or density because “of the difficulty in precisely defining the neurons belonging to INAH 3,” the area of the brain involved. A number of the “homosexual” men (five of the nineteen) and of the women (two of the six) appeared to have areas of the brain as large as those of the presumed heterosexual men. And in three of the presumed heterosexual men, this area of the brain was actually very small. What’s more, the sources of his data were widely varied. All the gay men in his sample died of AIDS, a disease known to affect the brain. (Reduced testosterone occurs among AIDS patients, and this alone may account for the different sizes.) And all the brains of the gay men were preserved in a formaldehyde solution that was of a different strength

than the solution in which the brains of the heterosexual men were preserved, because of the fears of HIV transmission, although there was no effort to control for the effect of the formaldehyde on the organs. It is possible that what LeVay may have been measuring was the combined effect of HIV infection and preservation in high densities of formaldehyde solution on postmortem brain structure, rather than differences in brain structure between living heterosexuals and homosexuals. A recent effort to replicate LeVay's findings failed, and one researcher went further, suggesting that "INAH-3 is not necessary for sexual behavior in men, whether they chose men or women as their partners."<sup>65</sup>

More recently, researchers have found that the brains of male transsexuals more closely resembled the brains of women than those of heterosexual, "normal" men. Dutch scientists at the Netherlands Institute for Brain Research examined the hypothalamus sections of forty-two men and women, six of whom were known to be transsexuals, and nine of whom were gay men, whereas the rest were presumed to be heterosexual. Again they found that the hypothalamus in the transsexual men and women was smaller than those in the heterosexual or homosexual men. Although they were careful *not* to interpret their findings in terms of sexual orientation because the heterosexual and homosexual men's brains were similar, they did take their research to signal sex differences because the male transsexuals were men who felt themselves to be women. However, it may also be a result of transsexual surgery and the massive amounts of female hormones that the male transsexuals took, which might have had the effect of shrinking the hypothalamus, just as the surgery and hormones also resulted in other anatomical changes (loss of facial and body hair, breast growth, etc.).<sup>66</sup>

Another recent study suggests that gay men are different from heterosexual men and more like heterosexual women. A group of Swedish researchers exposed heterosexual men and women and gay men to chemicals derived from male and female sex hormones (extracted from sweat glands in the armpit for males and urine for females) and recorded which parts of the brain were most visibly stimulated on a positron emission tomography scan. The brains of all three groups reacted similarly to various normal scents, like lavender or cedar: They recorded the information in the part of the brain that responds to olfactory sensations only. But when they were presented with testosterone, the part of the brain most closely associated with sexual activity (the hypothalamus) was triggered, but it remained quiescent among the heterosexual men; they responded only in the olfactory region. When presented with estrogen, by contrast, the females and gay men registered only in the olfactory area, whereas the heterosexual men responded strongly in the hypothalamus.<sup>67</sup> Although the response among journalists was a collective "Eureka! The gay brain," the researchers themselves were far more circumspect about the meaning of the results. The different pattern of activity could be a cause of sexual orientation—or a consequence, Dr. Savic told a reporter. "We cannot tell if the different pattern is cause or effect. The study does not give any answer to these crucial questions."<sup>68</sup> For another thing, the research did not measure anything about lesbians, so we don't know what sorts of armpit scents would drive their hypothalamus wild with desire.

Another recent study did examine lesbians' brain chemistry and found that the sounds emitted by the inner ears of lesbians fall in between the sounds emitted by the inner ears of men and heterosexual women, forming a sort of "intermediate" zone

between the two groups. (Lesbian emissions were stronger than men's but weaker than heterosexual women's.) Before we get carried away, though, I should mention that the research found no differences whatever between gay men and heterosexual men on such emissions.<sup>69</sup> "You can't assume that because you find a structural difference in the brain that it was caused by genes," says researcher Marc Breedlove. "You don't know how the difference got there." Another adds that we "are still unsure whether these signs are causes or effects."<sup>70</sup> Personally, I'm more concerned about the sounds of bias and false difference that flow *into* our ears than the sounds that flow *out* of them.

### THE SEARCH FOR THE GAY GENE

Other biological research has attempted to isolate a gay gene and thus show that sexual orientation has its basis in biology. For example, research on pairs of monozygotic twins (twins born from a single fertilized egg that splits in utero) suggests that identical twins have a statistically far higher likelihood of having similar sexualities (either both gay or both straight) than do dizygotic twins (twins born from two separate fertilized eggs). One genetic study involved eighty-five pairs of twins in the 1940s and 1950s. All forty pairs of monozygotic twins studied shared the same sexual orientation; if one twin was heterosexual, the other was also; if one twin was homosexual, so, too, was the other twin. Such data were so perfect that subsequent scientists have doubted their validity.<sup>71</sup>

More recently, Eckert and his colleagues found that in fifty-five pairs of twins, five had at least one gay member and that in a sixth pair, one twin was bisexual. Bailey and Pillard collected data on gay men who were twins, as well as on gay men who had adoptive brothers who lived in the same home before age two. The 161 respondents were drawn from responses to ads placed in gay periodicals and included 56 monozygotic twins, 54 dizygotic twins, and 57 adoptive brothers. Respondents were asked about their brothers' sexuality and were asked for permission to contact those brothers. About three-fourths of the brothers participated in the study. Bailey and Pillard found that in 52 percent of the monozygotic pairs, in 22 percent of the dizygotic pairs, and in 11 percent of the adoptive pairs, both brothers were homosexual or bisexual.<sup>72</sup>

Such findings were widely interpreted to mean that there is some biological foundation for men's sexual contact with other men. But several problems remain. The study was generated from self-identified homosexuals, not from a sample of twins.<sup>73</sup> What's more, there was no independent measure of the environment in which these boys grew up, so that what Bailey and Pillard might have measured is the predisposition of the environments to produce similar outcomes among twins. After all, biological predisposition should be more compelling than one-half. And the fact that fraternal twins of homosexual men were twice as likely as other biological brothers would mean that environmental factors *must* be present, because dizygotic twins share no more genetic material than other biological brothers. The increase in concordance could be just as convincingly explained by a continuum of similarity of treatment of brothers—from adoptive to biological to dizygotic to monozygotic—without any genetic component whatever.

Actually, what is most interesting in the twin studies is how little concordance there actually is. After all, having identical genetic material and the same family and

environmental conditions should produce a greater concordance than, at best, half. There is, however, some evidence that homosexual orientations tend to occur more frequently in family constellations. Psychiatrist Richard Pillard and psychologist James Weinrich questioned fifty heterosexual and fifty-one homosexual men and their siblings. Only 4 percent of the heterosexual men had brothers who were homosexual (the same percentage that had been found by Kinsey's studies in the 1940s), whereas about 22 percent of the gay men had gay or bisexual brothers. "This is rather strong evidence that male homosexuality clumps in families," said Weinrich, although there was no indication of the biological or genetic origin of this relationship. And the correlation, incidentally, did not hold true for women, as about the same percentage of the sisters of both groups said they had sisters who were lesbian. None said his or her parents were gay. This gender disparity might suggest that more than biology is at work here and that gender identity may have more to do with inequality than with genetics.<sup>74</sup>

Recently, sociologists Peter Bearman and Hannah Bruckner examined all the studies that purported that opposite-sex twins are more likely to be gay than twins who are not. They concluded that there are no hormonal connections whatever and that the level of sex stereotyping in early childhood socialization is a far better predictor of behavioral outcome than whether or not one has a twin of the opposite sex. Predicting sexual orientation from that evidence is sort of like predicting penis size from shoe size—there's not even a correlation, but if there were, it would be specious.<sup>75</sup>

### **ESTROGEN AND TESTOSTERONE: HORMONAL BASES FOR GENDER DIFFERENCES**

Sex differentiation faces its most critical events at two different phases of life: (1) fetal development, when primary sex characteristics are determined by a combination of genetic inheritance and the biological development of the embryo that will become a boy or a girl; and (2) puberty, when the bodies of boys and girls are transformed by a flood of sex hormones that causes the development of all the secondary sex characteristics. Breast development for girls, lowering of voices for boys, the development of facial hair for boys, and the growth of pubic hair for both are among puberty's most obvious signs.

A significant amount of biological research has examined each of these two phases in an attempt to chart the hormonal bases for sex differentiation. Much of this research has focused on the links between sex hormones and aggression in adolescent boys and on the links between sex hormones and aggression in women and on problems of normal hormonal development and the outcomes for gender identity development. Summarizing his reading of this evidence, sociologist Steven Goldberg writes that because "men and women differ in their hormonal systems" and "every society demonstrates patriarchy, male dominance and male attainment," it is logical to conclude that "the hormonal renders the social inevitable."<sup>76</sup>

Earlier, we saw how Geschwind and Behan found that during fetal development it is the "testosterone bath" secreted by slightly more than half of all fetuses that begins sex differentiation in utero. (All embryos, remember, begin as "female.") Geschwind and Behan found that this testosterone bath selectively attacks the left hemisphere, which is why males favor the right hemisphere. But the implication of fetal hormonal research is that the secretion of sex hormones has a decisive effect on the development

of gender identity and on the expressions of masculinity and femininity. We've all heard the arguments about how testosterone, the male sex hormone, is not only the driving force in the development of masculinity in males, but also the biological basis of human aggression, which is why males are more prone to violence than women. We should remember that women and men have both testosterone *and* estrogen, although typically in dramatically different amounts. On average, men do have about ten times the testosterone level that women have, but the level among men varies greatly, and some women have levels higher than some men.

In recent years, research has suggested some correlations between levels of testosterone and body mass, baldness, self-confidence, and even the ability and willingness to smile. Some wildly inflated claims about the effects of testosterone have led to both popular misconceptions and a variety of medical interventions to provide remedies. In one recent book, for example, psychologist James Dabbs proclaims that "testosterone increases masculinity," which was translated by a journalist into the equation that "lust is a chemical" as he looked forward to his "biweekly encounter with a syringe full of manhood."<sup>77</sup> And, of course, today men can purchase testosterone patches to boost their daily testosterone level or AndroGel, a product that seems to promise masculinity in a tube.<sup>78</sup>

Although the claims made for testosterone are often ridiculous, ministering less to science and more to men's fears of declining potency, there are some experiments on the relationship between testosterone and aggression that appear convincing. Males have higher levels of testosterone and higher rates of aggressive behavior than females do. What's more, if you increase the level of testosterone in a normal male, his level of aggression will increase. Castrate him—or at least a rodent proxy of him—and his aggressive behavior will cease entirely. Though this might lead one to think that testosterone is the cause of the aggression, Stanford neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky warns against such leaps of logic. He explains that if you take a group of five male monkeys arranged in a dominance hierarchy from 1 to 5, then you can pretty much predict how everyone will behave toward everyone else. (The top monkey's testosterone level will be higher than that of the monkeys below him, and levels will decrease down the line.) Number 3, for example, will pick fights with numbers 4 and 5, but will avoid and run away from number 1 and number 2. If you give number 3 a massive infusion of testosterone, he will likely become more aggressive—but only toward number 4 and number 5, with whom he has now become an absolute violent torment. He will still avoid number 1 and Number 2, demonstrating that the "testosterone isn't causing aggression, it's exaggerating the aggression that's already there."<sup>79</sup>

It turns out that testosterone has what scientists call a "permissive effect" on aggression: It doesn't cause it, but it does facilitate and enable the aggression that is already there. What's more, testosterone is produced *by* aggression, so that the correlation between the two may, in fact, have the opposite direction than previously thought. In his thoughtful book, *Testosterone and Social Structure*, Theodore Kemper notes several studies in which testosterone levels were linked to men's experiences. In studies of tennis players, medical students, wrestlers, nautical competitors, parachutists, and officer candidates, winning and losing determined levels of testosterone, so that the levels of the winners rose dramatically, whereas those of the losers dropped or remained the same. Kemper suggests that testosterone levels vary depending upon

men's experience of either dominance, "elevated social rank that is achieved by overcoming others in a competitive confrontation," or eminence, where elevated rank "is earned through socially valued and approved accomplishment." Significantly, men's testosterone levels prior to either dominance or eminence could not predict the outcome; it was the experience of rising status due to success that led to the elevation of the testosterone level. (These same experiences lead to increases in women's testosterone levels as well.)<sup>80</sup>

Several recent studies have made the earlier facile correlation quite a bit more interesting. A Finnish study found no difference in testosterone levels between violent and nonviolent men. But among the violent men, levels of testosterone did correlate with levels of hostility: The violent men with higher levels of testosterone were diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder. This supports the notion that testosterone has a permissive effect on aggression, because it correlates with hostility *only* among the violent men. And a UCLA researcher found that men with *low* testosterone were more likely to be angry, irritable, and aggressive than men with normal or high levels of testosterone. Although Sapolsky's statement that "testosterone is probably a vastly overrated hormone" may be an understatement, these last studies raise some troubling concerns, especially when compared with the questions about sexual orientation and hormone levels (see later).<sup>81</sup>

Some recent research approaches the relationship between testosterone and aggression from the other side. It turns out that marriage and fatherhood tend to depress the amount of testosterone in a man's body. In one study of fifty-eight Boston-area men (nearly all of whom were Harvard graduate or professional students), unmarried men had higher levels than did married men, and that difference increased only slightly when the married man had a child. Those married men with children who spent a lot of time doing child care had even lower levels. Actually, the testosterone levels differed only slightly, and only in the evening; samples taken in the morning, when one had rested, showed no differences at all. Yet from these results, massive leaps of logic followed. Because testosterone facilitates competition and aggression, fathers with children were opting out of this typically masculine activity. "Maybe it's very adaptive for men to suppress irritability," commented Peter Ellison, one of the study's authors. "Maybe the failure to do that places the child at risk." Maybe. Or maybe Harvard graduate students have lower testosterone levels than other men in Boston. Or maybe by the end of the day, trying to balance work and family life, an involved father is simply depleted. (Stress reduces levels of testosterone.) From such tiny and inconsistent differences, one should leap to no conclusions whatever.<sup>82</sup>

Some therapists, though, go much further and prescribe testosterone for men as a sort of chemical tonic, designed to provide the same sort of pep and "vim and vigor" that tonics and cure-alls promised at the turn of the twentieth century. Happy consumers swear by the results, and some therapists have even diagnosed a medically treatable malady (which should enable it to be covered by insurance) called "andropause" or "male menopause," treatable by hormone-replacement therapy for men.<sup>83</sup>

Much of the research on hormones and gender identity has been done by inference—that is, by examining cases where hormones did not work properly or where one biological sex got too much of the "wrong" hormone.<sup>84</sup> In some of the more celebrated research on fetal hormone development, Money and Ehrhardt reported on

## Can Food Make Us Gay?

That might not be as crazy as it sounds, at least according to evangelical preacher Jim Rutz. He argues that homosexuality is caused by insufficient amounts of the appropriate sex hormone and that therefore gay men are more “feminine” than straight men. And, he claims, soy products, like tofu, contain large amounts of estrogen, so “when you feed a baby soy formula, you’re giving him or her the equivalent of *five birth control pills a day*.” Eating tofu can turn you gay. “Soy is feminizing,” he claims, “and commonly leads to a decrease in the size of the penis, sexual confusion and homosexuality.” This idea was recently translated into a commercial for Hummers, the ultimate compensation for insecure gender identity.

Despite the fact that these assertions are biologically preposterous (and, in the case of penis size, simply untrue, as you’ll see in a few pages), there

is one fascinating implication of this assertion for a student of gender. Notice that soy is to be avoided because it contains female hormones, which would turn you gay. Well, who is the “you” in that sentence? A male! If homosexuality is a gender disorder (males who are feminized, females who are masculinized), why does the earnest Reverend Rutz not *prescribe soy products for girls, to make sure they don’t become lesbians? Are there only gay men?*

This concern about homosexuality turns out to be another moment of gender inequality. And although all of us should watch what we eat for health reasons, it’s unlikely that there is any food that can make you gay—or straight.

Source: Jim Rutz, “Soy is Making, Kids ‘Gay’” *World Net Daily*, December 12, 2006.

girls who had androgenital syndrome (AGS)—a preponderance of male hormones (androgens) in their systems at birth—and on another set of girls whose mothers had taken progestins during pregnancy. All twenty-five girls had masculine-appearing genitalia and had operations to “correct” their genitals. The AGS girls also were given constant cortisone treatments to enable their adrenal glands to function properly.<sup>85</sup>

Money and Ehrhardt’s findings were interesting. The girls and their mothers reported a higher frequency of tomboy behavior in these girls. They enjoyed vigorous outdoor games and sports, preferred toy cars and guns to dolls, and attached more importance to career plans than to marriage. However, they showed no more aggression or fighting than other girls. Later research seemed to confirm the notion that “prenatal androgen is one of the factors contributing to the development of temperamental differences between and within the sexes.”<sup>86</sup>

Appearances, however, can be deceiving. Medical researcher Anne Fausto-Sterling argues that several problems make Ehrhardt and her colleagues’ research less convincing than it at first may seem. The research suffered from “insufficient and inappropriate” controls: Cortisone is a powerful drug, and the AGS girls underwent calamitous surgery (including clitoridectomy), and there were no independent measures of the effects. Further, the “method of data collection is inadequate” because it was based entirely on interviews with parents and children, with no impartial direct observation of these reported behaviors. Finally, “the authors do not properly explore alternative explanations of their results,” such as parental expectations and differential treatment of their very “different” children.<sup>87</sup>

Another set of experiments examined the other side of the equation—boys who received higher-than-average doses of prenatal estrogen from mothers who were

## “As Nature Made Him”?

One of the most famous cases that purports to prove how biological sex is the sole foundation for gender identity concerned a Canadian boy, Bruce Reimer. In 1966, Bruce and his identical twin Brian underwent routine circumcisions in a hospital. Brian’s circumcision went smoothly, but Bruce’s went terribly wrong, and his penis was severed. His distraught parents brought him to Johns Hopkins University Medical Center, where, under the aegis of Dr. John Money, he was surgically “transformed” into a girl. Over the next decades “Brenda” was faced with several more surgical procedures, annual visits to Dr. Money’s clinic, and massive doses of female sex hormones, while her parents struggled to raise Brenda as a girl. And not just “a” girl—but a very frilly, feminine, and dainty girl at that. (Even though she described herself as a tomboy as a child, Brenda’s mother was determined that her “daughter” be “polite and quiet” and “ladylike.”)

Despite their becoming poster children for Money’s claims that gender identity is more malleable than originally thought and, indeed, that it can be changed, both twins grew up depressed and unhappy on the Canadian prairie, with parents who were both naïve and uncommunicative, and deeply ashamed of what had happened. Eventually, Brenda’s situation was revealed to a sexologist, Dr. Milton Diamond at the University of Hawaii, a longtime foe of John Money’s unorthodox ideas and practices. Under Diamond’s supervision, Brenda reclaimed his male gender identity, renamed himself “David,” and became the man he said he felt he always was. “Suddenly it all made sense why I felt the way I did,” he told a journalist who eventually wrote a best-selling book about his life. “I wasn’t some sort of weirdo. I wasn’t crazy.” David eventually married and adopted three children.<sup>90</sup>

His story, passionately told by journalist John Colapinto, became a book, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl*, and a TV documentary. Colapinto argues forcefully that David’s case demonstrates that nature trumps nurture, that biology is destiny, and that meddling with mother nature is

always disastrous. The case “provides stark evidence that a person’s brain predetermines sexual identity—not one’s anatomy or social environment,” was how a writer in the *Los Angeles Times* put it.<sup>91</sup>

But is the case that simple, that no matter how much tinkering one does, nature always trumps nurture? Any scientist should be wary of generalizing from a single case—especially a case with so many other factors that might have influenced the outcome. How would you feel about yourself, and your gender identity, if you were constantly being dragged to some hospital every few months throughout your early childhood, had your genitals poked and prodded and surgically “repaired,” and if everyone paid what would no doubt feel like an inordinate amount of attention to your genitalia? Would it change your opinion, for example, if I also told you that David’s father became an uncommunicative alcoholic, that his mother attempted suicide and was clinically depressed, and that his twin brother, Brian, became a drug addict and a criminal and eventually committed suicide himself? Or that even David killed himself as well, in part because, despite his hopes, he never fully felt comfortable as a male either? Confused and depressed, who wouldn’t want a magical explanation for all of one’s pain and suffering, that single “A-hah! That’s the reason I feel so weird!”

It’s not so simple. For one thing, the case’s assertions rest on the dubious premise, shared by Drs. Money and Diamond, that a child without a penis could not possibly be a boy and that a girl must be feminine—demure, restrained, and dressed in frilly clothes. Were our gender roles more elastic, we wouldn’t try so obsessively to coerce such behaviors from our children, who express far more variability than our norms about proper gender behavior. Surely our gender identity is the result of a complex interaction of genetics, brain chemistry, hormones, and our immediate familial environment, nestled within a more general social and cultural milieu. No one cause of something so complex and variable as gender identity could possibly be extracted, especially from one such troubling case.<sup>92</sup>



treated with estrogen during their pregnancies. Yalom, Green, and Fisk found that boys who received “female” hormones in utero were less active and less athletic than other boys. However, all the boys’ mothers were chronically and seriously ill during their infancy and childhood (which was not true for the control sample of normal boys). Perhaps the boys had simply been admonished against loud and boisterous play in the house so as not to disturb their mothers and had simply *learned* to be content while playing quietly or reading.<sup>88</sup>

About the relationship between women’s hormones and behaviors, we have the research on premenstrual syndrome (PMS). During the days just before menstruation, some women seem to exhibit symptoms of dramatic and wildly unpredictable mood changes, outbursts of violence, anger, and fits of crying. Alec Coppen and Neil Kessel studied 465 women and observed that they were more irritable and depressed during the premenstrual phase than during midcycle. Such behaviors have led physicians to label this time “premenstrual syndrome.” In fact, PMS has been listed as a disease in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* of the American Psychiatric Association, which guides physicians (and insurance companies) in treating illnesses. And, PMS has even been successfully used as a criminal defense strategy for a woman accused of violent outbursts. Two British women, arguing that PMS is a form of temporary insanity, have used PMS as a successful defense in their trials for the murder of their male partners.

The politics of PMS parallels the politics of testosterone. “If you had an investment in a bank, you wouldn’t want the president of your bank making a loan under those raging hormonal influences at that particular period,” one physician noted. “There are just physical and psychological inhabitants that limit a female’s potential.” Happily, PMS occurs for only a few days a month, whereas unpredictably high levels of testosterone in men may last all month. Perhaps these presumed bank investors might want to rethink their investment strategies. Or consider this observation by feminist writer Gloria Steinem: During those days immediately preceding her menstrual period (the PMS days), a woman’s estrogen level drops to its lowest point in the monthly cycle. Thus, just before menstruation, women, at least hormonally, more closely resemble men than at any other point in their cycle!<sup>89</sup> Perhaps, then, the only sensible purely biological solution would be to have every corporation, government office, and—especially—military operation run by gay men, whose levels of testosterone would presumably be low enough to offset the hormone’s propulsion toward aggression, while they would also be immune to the “raging hormonal influences” of PMS.

### **HORMONES AND HOMOSEXUALITY**

The research on the relationship between hormones and homosexuality might lead us in that direction, were we politically disposed to go there. However, most research on the relationship between prenatal hormones and sexual orientation has had exactly the opposite political agenda. At the turn of the twentieth century, many theorists held that homosexuals were “inverts,” creatures of one sex (their “true” sex) trapped in the body of the other. Some argued that homosexuality was “caused” by hormonal imbalances in utero that left males effeminate and therefore desiring men and left women masculine and therefore desiring women. In the 1970s, the German researcher Gunter Dorner, director of the Institute for Experimental Endocrinology at Humboldt

University in Berlin, and his associates argued that low levels of testosterone during fetal development, a rather tepid hormonal bath, would predispose males toward homosexuality. If rats did not receive enough of their appropriate sex hormone during fetal development, “then something would go wrong with the formation of the centers and with later sexual behavior,” reported two journalists. “Adult rats would behave in ways like members of the opposite sex. They would become, in a sense, ‘homosexual.’”<sup>93</sup>

Such research fit neatly with the era's antigay political agenda, suggesting as it did that male homosexuality was the result of insufficient prenatal masculine hormones or inadequate masculinity. Treatment of homosexuality—indeed, perhaps its cure—might be effected simply by injecting higher doses of testosterone into these men, whose recharged virility would transform them into heterosexuals with higher sex drives. When such an experiment was attempted, researchers found that the men's sex drive did indeed increase as a result of the testosterone injections. However, the object of their lusts did not change: They simply desired more sex with men! Hormone levels may affect sexual urges, and especially the intensity or frequency of sexual activity, but they are empirically and logically irrelevant to studies of sexual object choice.

Could prenatal stress account for a disposition toward homosexuality? In another series of studies, Dorner and his colleagues argued that more homosexual men are born during wartime than during peacetime. Their evidence for this claim was that a high proportion of the 865 men treated for venereal disease in six regions of the German Democratic Republic were born between 1941 and 1947. They theorized that because prenatal stress leads to a “significant decrease in plasma testosterone levels” among rat fetuses, which also leads to increased bisexual or homosexual behaviors among the adult rats, why not among humans? Dorner theorized that war leads to stress, which leads to a lowering of androgens in the male fetuses, which encourages the development of a homosexual orientation. Based on this trajectory, Dorner concluded that the prevention of war “may render a partial prevention of the development of sexual deviation.”<sup>94</sup> (Well, perhaps—but only because wartime tends to place men together in foxholes without women, where they may engage in homosexual activity more frequently than during peacetime.)<sup>95</sup>

Even if these data were convincing, a purely endocrinological account fails to satisfy. For example, one could just as easily construct a purely psychodynamic theory. For example: In wartime, children tend to grow up more often without a father or to be separated from other members of the family. If homosexuality really occurs more frequently during wartime, it would be just as reasonable to take this as “proof” of certain psychodynamic theories of homosexuality, e.g., the lack of a father, a particularly close bond between mother and son.

Another just-so story? Perhaps. But, then, so are explanations about aggregate levels of testosterone during wartime. Although these arguments may not be convincing, they continue to exert significant influence over our commonsense explanations of gender difference.

Another body of research on prenatal hormones examines hormonal anomalies as a clue to normal development. Take, for example, congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), a genetic defect that causes female fetuses to be exposed to extremely high levels of testosterone in utero. Girls with CAH really enjoy playing with boys' toys

and show decidedly masculine affective styles. But does that mean that there is “something in them that’s innately male,” as television celebrity and advocate of biological determinism John Sossel thinks?<sup>96</sup> Hardly.

The most interesting recent research on the relationship between prenatal hormones and sexual orientation has been carried out by psychologist Marc Breedlove and his students. Breedlove is a far more careful researcher than most, and he is also far more cautious in the claims he makes. Breedlove measured the lengths of the index and ring fingers (second and fourth digits) and calculated the ratios between them for both heterosexual women and lesbians and for gay and heterosexual men. It’s well known that for average women, the two fingers are usually the same length, whereas among average men, the index finger is more often significantly shorter than the fourth. This is assumed to be an effect of prenatal androgens on male fetuses. Breedlove found that the ratio between the two fingers was more “masculine” among the lesbians than the heterosexual women; that is, that lesbians’ index fingers were significantly shorter than their ring fingers. He found no differences between gay and straight men (both were equally “masculine”), although another study did find significant differences between the two, with gay men’s finger ratios being somewhat more “masculine” than heterosexual men.<sup>97</sup>

Breedlove believed that the difference between lesbians and heterosexual women was due to the effect of increased prenatal androgens among the lesbians—thus rendering them more “masculine.” Now this accords with traditional stereotypes that suggest that homosexuality is related to gender nonconformity. But one must be careful about overstating these stereotypes, because Breedlove found the exact opposite among men. Breedlove also found a relationship between birth order and sexual orientation for men. The greater the number of older brothers a man had, the higher the likelihood that he would be homosexual. In fact, subsequent researchers have suggested that each additional elder brother that a man has increases the likelihood that he will be gay by about 30 percent. Breedlove hypothesized that this also was the result of prenatal androgenization of subsequent children. Although this might not appear controversial, it accords with other studies that find that gay men’s levels of testosterone are significantly *higher* than those of heterosexual men. That is, gay men are more “real men” than are straight men. (Other research that supports the argument that gay men are “hypermasculine” includes studies that find that gay men’s penis size is greater than that of straight men, despite the fact that gay men undergo puberty a bit earlier and are therefore slightly shorter than straight men and that gay men report significantly higher amounts of sexual behavior.) “This calls into question all of our cultural assumptions that gay men are feminine,” said Breedlove in an interview—a thought that biological determinists and their political allies will not find especially comforting.<sup>98</sup>

This sort of research does give us pause. Anthony Bogaert did a similar study in which he found that there was no effect on sexual orientation by unrelated siblings in the same household (they had to be biological) but that older brothers who did not live with a person did influence the chances of that person being gay. This seems to rule out socialization effects (older nonrelated brothers “recruiting” the youngest through sexual coercion) or the outcome of seemingly harmless sexual play. Bogaert offers no speculation about why this might be the case or even about exactly what

sorts of physiological mechanisms cause it. It might be nature's way of reducing the number of males competing for increasingly scarce (with large broods of males) females. If so, it not only signals some biological elements to the origins of sexual orientation, but also makes a strong case for the naturalness of homosexuality.<sup>99</sup> At least male homosexuality. No birth order phenomena have been posited as predictors of lesbianism.

### **PUBERTAL HORMONAL INFLUENCES: THE RESEARCH ON HERMAPHRODITES**

One of the most intriguing tests of hormonal research has been carried out on hermaphrodites. Here, at the boundaries of biological sex, we can observe more clearly the processes that are often too difficult to see in "normal" biological development. Hermaphrodites are organisms that have both male and female characteristics. True hermaphrodites have either one ovary and one testicle or else a single organ with both types of reproductive tissue. They are exceedingly rare. Less rare, however, are those whose biological sex is ambiguous.<sup>100</sup>

Take the most celebrated case: Two relatively isolated villages in the Dominican Republic seemed to produce a larger-than-expected set of cases of genetically male hermaphrodites for at least three generations. These were babies born with internal male structures but with sex organs that resembled a clitoris more than they did a penis. Moreover, the testes had not descended at all, leaving what appeared to be a scrotum that resembled labia, as well as an apparently closed vaginal cavity. Their condition was the result of an extremely rare deficiency in a steroid, 5-alpha reductase. Eighteen of these babies were raised as girls and studied by a team of researchers from Cornell University.<sup>101</sup>

After these children had relatively uneventful childhoods, during which they played and acted like other little girls, their adolescence became somewhat more traumatic. They failed to develop breasts and noticed a mass of tissue in their groins that turned out to be testicles beginning a descent. At puberty, their bodies began to produce a significant amount of testosterone, which made their voices deepen, their muscles develop, and facial hair appear. Suddenly, these youngsters were no longer like the other girls! And so all but one of them switched and became males. One remained a female, determined to marry and have a sex change operation. (Another decided he was a male but continued to wear dresses and act as a female.) All the others were successful in making the transition; they became men, found typically masculine jobs (woodchoppers, farmers, miners), and married women.

Imperato-McGinley and her colleagues interpreted these events as a demonstration of the effect of prenatal and pubertal sex hormones. They argued that a prenatal dose of testosterone had created "male" brains, which had remained dormant within ambiguous and female-appearing physiological bodies. At puberty, a second secretion of testosterone activated these genetically masculine brains, and the youngsters made the transition without too much psychological trauma.

They didn't, however, do it alone. The other villagers had made fun of them, calling them *guevochos* ("eggs [testicles] at twelve") or *machihembra* ("first woman, then man"). But after they had made the move to become males, their neighbors were more encouraging and offered advice and gifts to ease the transition. Moreover, one

might argue that these children had a less-fixed relationship between early gender development and adolescent gender patterns precisely because of their ambiguous genital development. After three generations, they might have come to assume that a girl does not always develop into a woman. Anthropologist Gilbert Herdt argues that such “gender polymorphic” cultures have the ability to deal with radical gender changes across the life cycle far more easily than do “gender dimorphic” cultures, such as the United States, where we expect everyone to be either male or female for his or her entire life.<sup>102</sup> One might also ask what would have happened had these been little boys who, it turned out, had actually been female and were therefore invited to make a transition to being adult women. Who would choose to stay a girl if she could end up becoming a boy, especially in a culture in which the sexes are highly differentiated and males enjoy privileges that females do not? Would boys find a transition to becoming girls as easy?

Recent survey data suggest a somewhat different interpretation. Junior high school students in north-midwestern states (Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota) were asked what they would do if the next morning they awoke to find themselves transformed into the opposite sex. The girls thought about the question for a while, expressed modest disappointment, and then described the kinds of things they would do if they were suddenly transformed into boys. Become a doctor, fireman, policeman, or baseball player were typical answers. The boys, by contrast, took virtually no time before answering. “Kill myself” was the most common answer when they contemplated the possibility of life as a girl.<sup>103</sup>

### THE POLITICS OF BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM

Biological arguments for sex differences have historically tended to be politically conservative, suggesting that the social arrangements between women and men—including social, economic, and political discrimination based on sex—are actually the inevitable outcome of nature working in its mysterious ways. Political attempts to legislate changes in the gender order or efforts to gain civil rights for women or for gay men and lesbians have always been met with biological essentialism: Don’t fool with Mother Nature! James Dobson, a former professor of pediatrics and founder of Focus on the Family, a right-wing advocacy group, puts the case starkly:

I feel it is a mistake to tamper with the time-honed relationship of husband as loving protector and wife as recipient of that protection... Because two captains sink the ship and two cooks spoil the broth, I feel that a family must have a leader whose decisions prevail in times of differing opinions. [T]hat role has been assigned to the man of the house.<sup>104</sup>

Social scientists have also jumped onto the biological bandwagon. For example, sociologist Steven Goldberg, in his book *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, argues that because male domination is ubiquitous, eternal, it simply has to be based on biological origins. There is simply too much coincidence for it to be social. Feminism, Goldberg argues, is therefore a war with nature:

Women follow their own physiological imperatives... In this, and every other society [men] look to women for gentleness, kindness, and love, for refuge from a world

of pain and force... In every society basic male motivation is the feeling that the women and children must be protected... [T]he feminist cannot have it both ways: if she wishes to sacrifice all this, all that she will get in return is the right to meet men on male terms. She will lose.<sup>105</sup>

Politically, unequal social arrangements are, in the end, ordained by nature.<sup>106</sup>

But the evidence—occasionally impressive, often uneven—is far from convincing. If male domination is natural, based on biological imperatives, why, asks sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, must it be coercive, held in place by laws, traditions, customs, and the constant threat of violence for any woman who dares step out of line? Why would women want to enter male spheres, like colleges and universities, politics and the labor force, the professions, and the military, for which they are clearly biologically ill-suited?

Ironically, in the past decade, conservatives who argue that biological bases account for both sex differences and sexuality differences have been joined by some women and some gay men and lesbians, who have adopted an essentialism of their own. Some feminists, for example, argue that women should be pleased to claim “the intuitive and emotional strengths given by their right-hemisphere, in opposition to the over-cognitive, left-hemisphere-dominated, masculine nature.”<sup>107</sup> Often a feminist essentialism uses women’s experiences as mothers to describe the fundamental and irreducible differences between the sexes, rather than evolution, brain organization, or chemistry. Sociologist Alice Rossi argues that, because of their bodies, “women have a head start in easier reading of an infant’s facial expressions, smoothness of body motions, greater ease in handling a tiny creature with tactile gentleness.”<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, research on the biological bases of homosexuality suggests some unlikely new political allies and a dramatic shifting of positions. Gay brain research may have generated little light on the etiology of sexual orientation, but it has certainly generated significant political heat. In a way, the promotion of gay essentialism is a political strategy to normalize gayness. “It points out that gay people are made this way by nature,” observes Robert Bray, the director of public information of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. “It strikes at the heart of people who oppose gay rights and who think we don’t deserve our rights because we’re choosing to be the way we are.” Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard, the authors of the gay twin study, opined in a *New York Times* op-ed essay that a “biological explanation is good news for homosexuals and their advocates.” “If it turns out, indeed, that homosexuals are born that way, it could undercut the animosity gays have had to contend with for centuries,” added a cover story in *Newsweek*. Such an understanding would “reduce being gay to something like being left handed, which is in fact all that it is,” commented gay journalist and author Randy Shilts in the magazine. And Simon LeVay, whose research sparked the recent debate, hoped that homophobia would dissipate as the result of this research, because its basis in prejudice about the unnaturalness of homosexual acts would vanish. Gays would become “just another minority,” just another ethnic group, with an identity based on primordial characteristics.<sup>109</sup>

This political implication is not lost on conservatives, who are now taking up the social constructionist, “nurture” theory of sexual orientation as firmly as they argue for intractable biologically based differences between women and men. More than a

decade ago, then—Vice President Dan Quayle argued that homosexuality is a matter of choice—“the wrong choice,” he added quickly. Former Attorney General John Ashcroft agreed that it is “a choice which can be made and unmade.” Such thinking leads to the politically volatile though scientifically dubious “conversion” movement that holds that, through intensive therapy, gay men and lesbians can become happy and “healthy” heterosexuals.<sup>110</sup>

Others are less convinced. Gay historian John D’Emilio wondered if “we really expect to bid for real power from a position of ‘I can’t help it.’”<sup>111</sup> What’s more, such naturalization efforts are vulnerable to political subversion by the very forces they are intended to counteract. Antigay forces could point to a brain defect and suggest possible prenatal interventions for prevention and postnatal “cures.” The headline in the *Washington Times* heralding LeVay’s research shouted: “Scientists Link Brain Abnormality, Homosexuality.” LeVay himself acknowledges this danger, commenting that “the negative side of it is that with talk of an immutable characteristic, you then can be interpreted as meaning a defect or a congenital disorder. You could say that being gay is like having cystic fibrosis or something, which should be aborted or corrected in utero.” And no sooner did he say that than James Watson, Nobel laureate for his discovery of the double helix in genetics, suggested that women who are found to be carrying the gene for homosexuality ought to be allowed to abort the child. “If you could find the gene which determines sexuality and a woman decides she doesn’t want a homosexual child, well, let her,” he said in an interview.

What this debate ignores is what we might call the *sociology* of gay essentialism: the ways in which gender remains the organizing principle of the homosexual essence. Notice how essentialist research links homosexuality with gender inversion, as if *women* were the reference point against which gay and straight men were to be measured. Gay men, it turns out, have “female” brain structures, thus making gay men into hermaphrodites—women’s brains in men’s bodies—a kind of neurological third sex. But if gay men and women had similar brain structures, then the headline in the *Washington Times* cited earlier might have more accurately problemized heterosexual men, the numerical minority, as the deviant group with the brain abnormalities.

More significantly, though, these studies miss the social organization of gay sex—the ways in which the who, what, where, when, how, and how many are governed by gender norms. In their sexual activities, rates of sexual encounters and variations, gay men and lesbians are far greater gender *conformists* than they are nonconformists. Gay men’s sexuality looks strikingly like straight men’s sexuality—except for the not-completely-incident detail of the gender of their object choice. Regardless of sexual orientation, virtually all sex research points to one conclusion: Gender, *not sexual orientation*, is the organizing principle of sexual behavior. Gay men and straight men seek masculine sex; sex is confirmation of masculinity. Straight women and lesbians experience feminine sex; sex is confirmation of femininity.<sup>112</sup>

The gender organization of sexuality also explains who believes it. Recent surveys have shown that, overwhelmingly, it is gay *men* who believe that their homosexuality is natural, biological, and inborn. Lesbians are more likely to believe that their homosexuality is socially constructed.<sup>113</sup> Gay men lean toward essentialist explanations, Vera Whisman argues, because gender privilege gives them the possibility of access to higher status positions; if their homosexuality is biological, it can be overlooked and they can

claim their “rightful” (read: masculine) status. Lesbian sexuality is seen by lesbians as more socially and historically contingent because lesbians are doubly marginalized, and their sexuality and gender identity are often, but not always, conditioned by an ideological connection to feminism. As lesbian-feminist writer Charlotte Bunch argues:

Woman identified Lesbianism is, then, more than a sexual preference, it is a political choice. It is political because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance. Since the Lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system.<sup>14</sup>

For lesbians, sexual behavior implies a political statement about living outside the mainstream; gay men see it as an accident of birth to be overcome by being overlooked.

## CONCLUSION

Biological research holds significant sway over our thinking about the two fundamental questions in the study of gender: the *differences* between women and men and the gendered *inequalities* that are evident in our social lives. But from the perspective of a social scientist, the biologists may have it backward. Innate gender differences do not automatically produce the obvious social, political, and economic inequalities we observe in contemporary society. In fact, the reverse seems to be true: Gender inequality, over time, ossifies into observable differences in behaviors, attitudes, and traits. If one were to raise a person in a dark room and then suddenly turn the lights on, and the person had a difficult time adjusting to the light, would you conclude that the person had genetic eye problems compared with the population that had been living in the light all that time?

There are many problems with the research on biological bases for gender difference and more and greater problems with the extrapolation of those differences to the social world of gender inequality. Consider the problem of what we might call “anthropomorphic hyperbole.” Neurobiologist Simon LeVay writes that, “Genes demand instant gratification.”<sup>15</sup> What are we to make of such an obviously false statement? Genes do not “demand” anything. And which genes is he talking about anyway? Some genes simply control such seemingly unimportant and uninteresting things as eye color or the capacity to differentiate between sweet and sour tastes. Others wait patiently for decades until they can instruct a man’s hair to begin to fall out. Still others are so undemanding that they may wait patiently for several generations, until another recessive mate is found after multiple attempts at reproduction. Genes may play a role in the sexual decision making of a species or even of individual members of any particular species; they do so only through an individual’s interaction with his or her environment. They cannot possibly control any particular decision made by any particular individual at any particular time. With whom you decide to have sex this weekend—or even if you *do* have sex—is not determined by your genes, but rather by you.

Another problem in biological research has been the casual assumption that causation always moves from physiology to psychology. Just because one finds a correlation between two variables doesn’t permit one to speculate about the causal direction. As biologist Ruth Hubbard argues:



If a society put half its children into short skirts and warns them not to move in ways that reveal their panties, while putting the other half into jeans and overalls and encouraging them to climb trees, play ball, and participate in other vigorous outdoor games; if later, during adolescence, the children who have been wearing trousers are urged to “eat like growing boys” while the children in skirts are warned to watch their weight and not get fat; if the half in jeans runs around in sneakers or boots, while the half in skirts totters about on spike heels, then these two groups of people will be biologically as well as socially different.<sup>116</sup>

We know, then, what we *cannot* say about the biological bases for gender difference and gender inequality. But what *can* we say? We can say that biological differences provide the raw materials from which we begin to create our identities within culture, within society. “Biological sexuality is the necessary precondition for human sexuality,” writes historian Robert Padgug. “But biological sexuality is only a precondition, a set of potentialities, which is never unmediated by human reality, and which becomes transformed in qualitatively new ways in human society.”<sup>117</sup>

At the conclusion to his powerful indictment of social Darwinism, first published in 1944, the eminent historian Richard Hofstadter pointed out that biological ideas such as survival of the fittest:

whatever their doubtful value in natural science, are utterly useless in attempting to understand society; that the life of man in society, while it is incidentally a biological fact, has characteristics that are not reducible to biology and must be explained in the distinctive terms of a cultural analysis; that the physical well-being of men is a result of their social organization and not vice versa; that social improvement is a product of advances in technology and social organization, not of breeding or selective elimination; that judgments as to the value of competition between men or enterprises or nations must be based upon social and not allegedly biological consequences...<sup>118</sup>

In his presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Troy Duster warned of the “increasing authority of reductionist science” informing public conversations. A recent article by psychologist Deena Skolnick Weisberg and her colleagues suggest just how prescient is Duster’s comment. Weisberg and her colleagues gave three groups—regular adults, students in a neuroscience course, and neuroscience experts—a set of descriptions of psychological phenomena, followed by different types of explanations for those phenomena. These explanations were either good or bad explanations, though one of each type also had utterly irrelevant neuroscientific information randomly thrown in.

Everyone thought the good explanations were better than the bad ones. But the nonexpert groups also found the explanations—good and bad—with the trumped up neuroscience information more satisfying than those without the information—even though the information was utterly useless. It was especially helpful in making bad explanations sound more reasonable.<sup>119</sup> (I suppose that sly students might have determined that adding a dollop of irrelevant scientific jargon to an answer on an exam might obscure the fact that they don’t really know what they are talking about, but that would work only in a class that wasn’t using this book. Sorry.)



" . . . so you see, women think with their brain, whereas men think with their penis."

**Figure 2.2.** Courtesy of Mike Shapiro/mikeshapirocartoons.com.

Scientists have yet to discover the gene that carries the belief in nature over nurture; it is not yet clear which half of the brain blots out evidence of cultural or individual variation from evolutionary imperatives. Is human gullibility for pseudoscientific explanations carried on a particular chromosome? Scientists—social, behavioral, natural, biological—will continue to disagree as they hunt for the origins of human behavior. What they must all recognize is that people behave differently in different cultures and that even similar behaviors may mean different things in different contexts.

Americans seem to want desperately to believe that the differences between women and men are significant and that those differences can be traced to biological origins. A cover story in *Newsweek* promised to explain “Why Men and Women Think Differently,” although the story revealed problems with every bit of evidence and concluded that “the research will show that our identities as men and women are creations of both nature and nurture. And that no matter what nature deals us, it is we—our choices, our sense of identity, our experiences in life—who make ourselves what we are.”<sup>120</sup>

How we do that, how we create identities out of our experiences, how we understand those experiences, and the choices we make—these are the province of social science, which tries to explore the remarkable diversity of human experience. Although biological studies can suggest to us the basic building blocks of experience and identity, it is within our cultures, our societies, and our families that those building blocks are assembled into the astonishingly diverse architecture that constitutes our lives.



# Spanning the World

## *Culture Constructs Gender Difference*

If a test of a civilization be sought, none can be so sure as the condition of that half of society over which the other half has power.

—HARRIET MARTINEAU  
*Society in America* (1837)

Biological models assume that biological sex determines gender, that innate biological differences lead to behavioral differences, which in turn lead to social arrangements. By this account, social inequalities are encoded into our physiological composition. Biological anomalies alone should account for variation. But the evidence suggests otherwise. When children like the Dominican pseudohermaphrodites are raised as the other *gender* they can easily make the transition to the other *sex*. And how do we account for the dramatic differences in the definitions of masculinity and femininity around the world? And how come some societies have much wider ranges of gender inequality than others? On these questions, the biological record is mute.

What's more, biology is not without its own biases, though these have been hard to detect. Some anthropologists argue that biological models projected contemporary Western values onto other cultures. These projections led evolutionists like Steven Goldberg to ignore the role of women and the role of colonialism in establishing gender differences in traditional cultures. Anthropologists like Karen Brodtkin suggest that

biological researchers always assumed that gender *difference* implied gender *inequality*, because Western notions of difference do usually lead to and justify inequality. In other words, gender difference is the *result* of gender inequality—not the other way around.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropological research on cultural variations in the development of gender definitions arose, in part, in response to such casual biological determinism. The more we found out about other cultures, the more certain patterns emerged. The evolutionary world and ethnographic world offer a fascinating diversity of cultural constructions of gender. Yet some themes do remain constant. Virtually all societies manifest some amount of difference between women and men, and virtually all cultures exhibit some form of male domination, despite variations in gender definition. So anthropologists have also tried to explore the link between the near-universals of gender difference and gender inequality. Some search for those few societies in which women hold positions of power; others examine those rituals, beliefs, customs, and practices that tend to increase inequality and those that tend to decrease it.

### THE VARIATIONS IN GENDER DEFINITIONS

When anthropologists began to explore the cultural landscape, one of the first things they found was far more variability in the definitions of masculinity and femininity than any biologist would have predicted. Men possessed of relatively similar levels of testosterone, with similar brain structure and lateralization, seemed to exhibit dramatically different levels of aggression, violence, and, especially, aggression toward women. Women with similar brains, hormones, and ostensibly similar evolutionary imperatives have widely varying experiences of passivity, PMS, and spatial coordination. One of the most celebrated anthropologists to explore these differences was Margaret Mead, whose research in the South Seas (Samoa, Polynesia, Indonesia) remains, despite some significant criticism, an example of engaged scholarship, clear writing, and important ideas. Mead was clear that sex differences are “not something deeply biological,” but rather are learned and, once learned, become part of the ideology that continues to perpetuate them. Here’s how she put it:

I have suggested that certain human traits have been socially specialized as the appropriate attitudes and behavior of only one sex, while other human traits have been specialized for the opposite sex. This social specialization is then rationalized into a theory that the socially decreed behavior is natural for one sex and unnatural for the other, and that the deviant is a deviant because of glandular defect, or developmental accident.<sup>2</sup>

In *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), Mead explored the differences in those definitions, whereas in several other books, such as *Male and Female* (1949) and *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), she explored the processes by which males and females become the men and women their cultures prescribe. No matter what she seemed to be writing about, though, Mead always had one eye trained on the United States. In generating implicit comparisons between our own and other cultures, Mead defied us to maintain the fiction that because it is so here, it must be right and cannot be changed.

In *Sex and Temperament*, Mead directly took on the claims of biological inevitability. By examining three very different cultures in New Guinea, she hoped to show

the enormous cultural variation possible in definitions of masculinity and femininity and, in so doing, to enable Americans better to understand both the cultural origins and the malleability of their own ideas. The first two cultures exhibited remarkable similarities between women and men. Masculinity and femininity were not the lines along which personality differences seemed to be organized. Women and men were not the “opposite” sex. For example, all members of the Arapesh culture appeared gentle, passive, and emotionally warm. Males and females were equally “happy, trustful, confident,” and individualism was relatively absent. Men and women shared child rearing; both were “maternal,” and both discouraged aggressiveness among boys and girls. Both men and women were thought to be relatively equally sexual, though their sexual relationships tended to be “domestic” and not “romantic” or apparently what we might call passionate. Although female infanticide and male polygamy were not unknown, marriage was “even and contented.” Indeed, Mead pronounced the political arrangements “utopian.” Here’s how she summed up Arapesh life:

quiet and uneventful co-operation, singing in the cold dawn, and singing and laughter in the evening, men who sit happily playing to themselves on hand-drums, women holding suckling children to their breasts, young girls walking easily down the centre of the village, with the walk of those who are cherished by all about them.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, Mead describes the Mundugamor, a tribe of headhunters and cannibals, who also viewed women and men as similar but expected both sexes to be equally aggressive and violent. Women showed little “maternal instinct”; they detested pregnancy and nursing and could hardly wait to return to the serious business of work and war. “Mundugamor women actively dislike child-bearing, and they dislike children,” Mead writes. “Children are carried in harsh opaque baskets that scratch their skins, later, high on their mother’s shoulders, well away from the breast.” Among the Mundugamor, there was a violent rivalry between fathers and sons (there was more infanticide of boys than of girls), and all people experienced a fear that they were being wronged by others. Quite wealthy (partly as a result of their methods of population control), the Mundugamor were, as Mead concludes, “violent, competitive, aggressively sexual, jealous, ready to see and avenge insult, delighting in display, in action, in fighting.”<sup>4</sup>

Here, then, were two tribes that saw gender differences as virtually nonexistent. The third culture Mead described was the Tchambuli, where, as in the United States, women and men were seen as extremely different. This was a patrilineal culture in which polygyny was accepted. Here, one sex was composed primarily of nurturing and gossipy consumers who spent their days dressing up and going shopping. They wore curls and lots of jewelry, and Mead describes them as “charming, graceful, coquettish.” These, incidentally, were the men, and they liked nothing better than to “go off resplendent in feathers and shell ornaments to spend a delightful few days” shopping. The women were dominant, energetic, economic providers. It was they who fished, an activity upon which the entire culture depended, and it was they “who have the real positions of power in the society.” Completely unadorned, they were efficient, business-like, controlled all the commerce and diplomacy of the culture, and were the initiators of sexual relations. Mead notes that the Tchambuli were the only culture she had ever seen “where little girls of ten and eleven were more alertly intelligent and

		Females	
		Masculine	Feminine
Males	Masculine	Mundugamor	Unites States
	Feminine	Tchambuli	Arapesh

**Figure 3.1.** From Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: William Morrow, 1935) (plus her implicit fourth case). Used with permission.

more enterprising than little boys.” She writes that “[w]hat the women will think, what the women will say, what the women will do lies at the back of each man’s mind as he weaves his tenuous and uncertain web of insubstantial relations with other men.” By contrast, “the women are a solid group, confused by no rivalries, brisk, patronizing, and jovial.”<sup>5</sup>

What Mead found, then, were two cultures in which women and men were seen as similar to each other and one culture in which women and men were seen as extremely different from each other—but exactly the opposite of the model familiar to us. Each culture, of course, believed that women and men were the way they were because their biological sex *determined* their personality. None of them believed that women and men were the outcome of economic scarcity, military success, or cultural arrangements (figure 3.1).

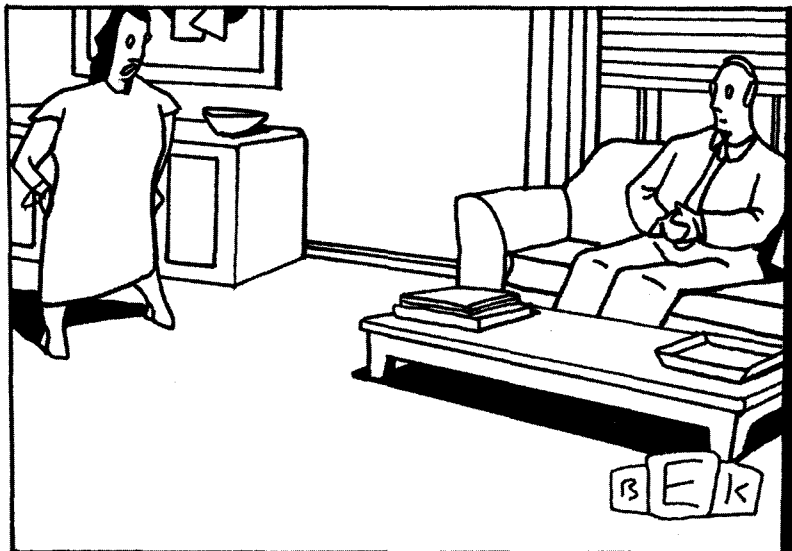
Mead urged her readers to “admit men and women are capable of being molded to a single pattern as easily as a diverse one.”<sup>6</sup> She demonstrated that women and men are *capable* of similar or different temperaments; she did not adequately explain *why* women and men turn out to be different or the same. These, then, are the questions for anthropologists: What are the determinants of women’s and men’s experiences? Why should male domination be nearly universal? These questions have been taken up by other anthropologists.

### **THE CENTRALITY OF THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR**

In almost every society, labor is divided by gender (as well as age). Certain tasks are reserved for women, others for men. How do we explain this gender division of labor, if not by some biologically based imperatives?

One school of thought, functionalism, maintains that a sex-based division of labor was necessary for the preservation of the society. As society became increasingly complex, there arose a need for two kinds of labor: hunting and gathering. Functionalists differ as to whether this division of labor had any *moral* component, whether the work of one sex was more highly valued than the work of the other. But they agree that the sex-based division of labor was functionally necessary for these societies. Such models often assume that because the sex-based division of labor arose to meet certain social needs at one time, its preservation is an evolutionary imperative, or at least an arrangement that is not to be trifled with casually.

On the other hand, because the sex-based division of labor has a history, it is not biologically inevitable; societies have changed and will continue to change. And it's a very recent history at that. "The sexual division of labor as we know it today probably developed quite recently in human evolution," writes anthropologist Adrienne Zihlman.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this sex-based division of labor is far more varied than we might have assumed. In some cultures, women build the house; in others, they do the cooking. But in a few, it's the reverse. In most cultures women are responsible for child care. But not in all cultures, and women are certainly not doing it all. In some cultures, tasks are dramatically skewed and labor rigidly divided; others offer far more flexibility and fluidity. Today, a sex-based division of labor is functionally anachronistic, and the biological bases for specific social tasks being assigned to either men or women have long been eroded. In the place of such foundations, though, lie centuries of social customs and traditions that today contribute to our gender ideologies about what is appropriate for one sex and not the other. The gender-based division of labor has become a part of our culture, not a part of our physical constitutions.



*"You know, in some cultures the male does things."*

**Figure 3.2.** © The New Yorker Collection 2001, Bruce Eric Kaplan from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

In fact, our physical constitutions have become less determinative in the assignment of tasks and the choosing of careers. It may even be true that the less significance there is to real physical differences, the more emphasis we place on them ideologically. For example, men no longer need to have physical strength to be powerful and dominant. The most highly muscular men, in fact, appear in cultural sideshows of body-building competition, but they do no more physical labor than the average suburban husband mowing the lawn and shoveling snow. As for women, the technologies of family planning and sexual autonomy—birth control technology, legal abortion, and institutional child care—have freed them from performing only child care duties and enabled them to participate in the institutions of the public sphere.

Once free, women have entered every area of the public sphere. A century ago, women campaigned to enter the college classroom, the polling place, the professions, and the work world. More recently, it's been the military and military colleges that have opened their doors to women, the latter by court order. Today, very few occupations exist for which only women or only men are strictly biologically suited. Ask yourselves: What occupations do you know of that *biologically* only women or only men could perform? Offhand, I can think of only three: for women, wet nurse and surrogate mother; for men, professional sperm donor. None of these is exactly a career of choice for most of us.

If a sex-based division of labor has outlived its social usefulness or its physical imperatives, it must be held in place by something else: the power of one sex over the other. Where did that power come from? How has it developed? How does it vary from culture to culture? What factors exaggerate it; what factors diminish it? These are among the questions that anthropologists have endeavored to answer.

## **THEORIES OF GENDER DIFFERENTIATION AND MALE DOMINATION**

Several theorists have tried to explain the sexual division of labor and gender inequality by reference to large, structural forces that transform societies' organizing principles. They've pointed to the impact of private property, the demands of war, and the importance of male bonding to hunting and gathering as possible explanations (figure 3.3).

### **Private Property and the Materialism of Male Domination**

In the late nineteenth century, Friedrich Engels applied ideas that he developed with his collaborator, Karl Marx, and assigned to private property the role of central agent in determining the division of labor by sex. In *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels suggested that the three chief institutions of modern Western society—a capitalist economy, the nation-state, and the nuclear family—emerged at roughly the same historical moment—and all as a result of the development of private property. Prior to that, Engels asserts, families were organized on a communal basis, with group marriage, male-female equality, and a sexual division of labor without any moral or political rewards going to males or females. The birth of the capitalist economy created wealth that was mobile and transferable—unlike land, which stays in the same place. Capitalism meant private property, which required the establishment of clear lines of inheritance. This requirement led, in turn, to new problems of sexual fidelity. If a man were to pass his property on to his son, he had to be sure that his son





*"We've gathered enough. Let's hunt."*

**Figure 3.3.** © The New Yorker Collection 1997, Stuart Leeds from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

was, indeed, *his*. How could he know this in the communal group marriage of precapitalist families?

Out of this need to transmit inheritance across generations of men the traditional nuclear family emerged, with monogamous marriage and the sexual control of women by men. And if inheritance were to be stable, these new patriarchs needed to have clear, binding laws, vigorously enforced, that would enable them to pass their legacies on to their sons without interference from others. This required a centralized political apparatus (the nation-state) to exercise sovereignty over local and regional powers that might challenge them.<sup>8</sup>

Some contemporary anthropologists continue in this tradition. Eleanor Leacock, for example, argues that prior to the rise of private property and social classes, women and men were regarded as autonomous individuals, who held different positions that were held in relatively equal esteem. "When the range of decisions made by women is considered," she writes, "women's autonomous and public role emerges. Their status was not as literal 'equals' of men... but as what they were—female persons, with their own rights, duties and responsibilities, which were complementary to and in no way secondary to those of men." In her ethnographic work on the Labrador peninsula, Leacock shows the dramatic transformation of women's former autonomy by the introduction of the fur trade. The introduction of a commercial economy turned powerful women into home-bound wives. Here again, gender inequality, introduced

by economic shifts, resulted in increasing differences in the meanings of masculinity and femininity.<sup>9</sup>

Karen Sacks (now Karen Brodtkin) examined four African cultures and found that the introduction of the market economy shifted basically egalitarian roles toward male dominance. As long as the culture was involved in producing goods for its own use, men and women were relatively equal. But the more involved the tribe became in a market exchange economy, the higher the level of gender inequality and the lower the position of women. Conversely, when women and men shared access to the productive elements of the society, the result was a higher level of sexual egalitarianism.<sup>10</sup>

### **Warfare, Bonding, and Inequality**

Another school of anthropological thought traces the origins of male domination to the imperatives of warfare in primitive society. How does a culture create warriors who are fierce and strong? Anthropologist Marvin Harris has suggested two possibilities. The culture can provide different rewards for the warriors, based on their dexterity or skill. But this would limit the solidarity of the fighting force and sow seeds of dissent and enmity among the soldiers. More effective would be to reward virtually all men with the services of women, excluding only the most inadequate or cowardly men. Warrior societies tend to practice female infanticide, Harris observes, ensuring that the population of females remains significantly lower than that of males (and thus the males will be competing for the women). Warrior societies also tend to exclude women from the fighting force, because their presence would reduce the motivation of the soldiers and upset the sexual hierarchy. In this way, warfare leads to female subordination as well as patrilinearity, because the culture will need a resident core of fathers and sons to carry out its military tasks. Males come to control the society's resources and, as a justification for this, develop patriarchal religion as an ideology that legitimates their domination over women.<sup>11</sup>

Two other groups of scholars use different variables to explain the differences between women and men. Descent theorists, like Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, stress the invariance of the mother-child bond. Men, by definition, lack the tie that mothers have with their children. How, then, can they achieve that connection to the next generation, the connection to history and society? They form it with other men in the hunting group. This is why, Tiger and Fox argue, women must be excluded from the hunt. In all societies, men must somehow be bound socially to the next generation, to which they are not inextricably, biologically connected. Male solidarity and monogamy are the direct result of men's needs to connect with social life.<sup>12</sup> Alliance theorists like Claude Lévi-Strauss are less concerned with the need to connect males to the next generation than they are with the ways that relationships among men come to organize social life. Lévi-Strauss argues that men turn women into sex objects whose exchange (as wives) cements the alliances among men. Both descent and alliance theorists treat these themes as invariant and natural, rather than as the outcomes of historical relationships that vary dramatically not only over time but also across cultures.<sup>13</sup>

### **DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S STATUS**

Virtually every society of which we have knowledge claims some differentiation between women and men, and virtually every society exhibits patterns of gendered inequality and male domination. Yet the variety within these universals is still astounding. Gender

differences and gender inequality may be more or less pronounced. It is not simply the case that the higher the degree of gender differentiation, the greater the gender inequality, although this is generally the pattern. One could, conceivably, imagine four such possibilities—high or low levels of gender differentiation coupled with either high or low levels of gender inequality.

What, then, are the factors that seem to determine women's status in society? Under what conditions is women's status improved, and under what conditions is it minimized? Economic, political, and social variables tend to produce different cultural configurations. For example, one large-scale survey of different cultures found that the more a society needs physical strength and highly developed motor skills, the larger will be the differences in socialization between males and females. It also seems to be the case that the larger the family group, the larger the differences between women and men. In part this is because the isolation of the nuclear family means that males and females will need to take the others' roles on occasion, so that strict separation is rarely enforced.<sup>14</sup>

One of the key determinants of women's status has been the division of labor around child care. Women's role in reproduction has historically limited their social and economic participation. Although no society assigns all child-care functions to men, the more that men participate in child care and the freer women are from child-rearing responsibility, the higher women's status tends to be. There are many ways to free women from sole responsibility. In non-Western societies, several customs evolved, including employing child nurses who care for several children at once, sharing child care with husbands or with neighbors, and assigning the role of child care to tribal elders, whose economic activity has been curtailed by age.<sup>15</sup>

Relationships between children and their parents have also been seen as keys to women's status. Sociologist Scott Coltrane found that the closer the relationship between father and son, the higher the status of women is likely to be. Coltrane found that in cultures where fathers are relatively uninvolved, boys define themselves *in opposition* to their mothers and other women and therefore are prone to exhibit traits of hypermasculinity, to fear and denigrate women as a way to display masculinity. The more mothers and fathers share child rearing, the less men belittle women. Margaret Mead also emphasized the centrality of fatherhood. Most cultures take women's role in child rearing as a given, whereas men must learn to become nurturers. There is much at stake, but nothing inevitable: "every known human society rests firmly on the learned nurturing behavior of men."<sup>16</sup>

That men must learn to be nurturers raises the question of masculinity in general. What it means to be a man varies enormously from one culture to another, and these definitions have a great deal to do with the amount of time and energy fathers spend with their children. Such issues are not simply incidental for women's lives either; it turns out that the more time men spend with their children, the less gender inequality is present in that culture. Conversely, the freer women are from child care—the more that child care is parceled out elsewhere and the more that women control their fertility—the higher will be their status. Coltrane also found that women's status depends upon their control over property, especially after marriage. A woman's status is invariably higher when she retains control over her property after marriage.

Interestingly, recent research on male bonding, so necessary to those theories that stress warfare or the necessity of attaching males to the social order, also seems to bear

this out. Sociologist and geographer Daphne Spain argues that the same cultures in which men developed the most elaborate sex-segregated rituals were those cultures in which women's status was lowest. Spain mapped a number of cultures spatially and found that the greater the distance the men's hut was from the center of the village, the more time the men spent at their hut and that the more culturally important were the men's rituals, the lower was women's status. "Societies with men's huts are those in which women have the least power," she writes. If you spend your time away from your hut, off at the men's hut with the other men, you'll have precious little time, and even less inclination, to spend with your family and to share in child rearing!<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, anthropologist Thomas Gregor found that all forms of spatial segregation between males and females are associated with gender inequality. The Mehinaku of central Brazil, for example, have well-institutionalized men's huts where the tribal secrets are kept and ritual instruments are played and stored. Women are prohibited from entering. As one tribesman told Gregor, "[t]his house is only for men. Women may not see anything in here. If a woman comes in, then all the men take her into the woods and she is raped."<sup>18</sup>

These two variables—the father's involvement in child rearing (often measured by spatial segregation) and women's control of property after marriage—emerge as among the central determinants of women's status and gender inequality. It is no wonder that they are also determinants of violence against women, because the lower women's status in a society, the higher the likelihood of rape and violence against women. In one of the most wide-ranging comparative studies of women's status, Peggy Reeves Sanday found several important correlates of women's status. Contact was one. Sex segregation was highly associated with women's lower status, as if separation were "necessary for the development of sexual inequality and male dominance." (By contrast, a study of a sexually egalitarian society found no ideology of the desirability of sex segregation.) Of course, women's economic power, that crucial determinant, is "the result of a sexual division of labor in which women achieve self-sufficiency and establish an independent control sphere." In addition, in cultures that viewed the environment as relatively friendly, women's status was significantly higher; cultures that saw the environment as hostile were more likely to develop patterns of male domination.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, Sanday found that women had the highest levels of equality, and thus the least frequency of rape, when both genders contributed about the same amounts to the food supply. When women contributed equally, men tended to be more involved in child care. Ironically, when women contributed a lot, their status was also low. So women's status tended to be lower when they contributed either very little or a great deal and more equal when their contribution was about equal.

We can now summarize the findings of cross-cultural research on female status and male dominance.

1. Male dominance is lower when men and women work together, with little sexual division of labor. Sex segregation of work is the strongest predictor of women's status.
2. Male dominance is more pronounced when men control political and ideological resources that are necessary to achieve the goals of the culture and when men control all property.

3. Male dominance is “exacerbated under colonization”—both capitalist penetration of the countryside and industrialization generally lower women’s status. Male dominance is also associated with demographic imbalances between the sexes: The higher the percentage of marriageable men to marriageable women, the lower is women’s status.
4. Environmental stresses tend to exaggerate male domination.<sup>20</sup>

### THE CROSS-CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF RAPE

The earlier quotation, cited by Gregor, and the research of Peggy Reeves Sanday and others suggest that rape is not the evolutionary reproductive strategy of the less-successful males, as was suggested by some evolutionary psychologists. Rather, rape is a cultural phenomenon by which relations between men are cemented. Rape may be a strategy to ensure continued male domination or a vehicle by which men can hope to conceal maternal dependence, according to ethnographers, but it is surely not an alternative dating strategy.

Think, for example, of the way that rape is used in warfare. The mass rape of Bosnian women or the current mass rapes of women in the Sudan or the Congo are not some product of convoluted expression of evolutionary mating strategies, but rather a direct and systematic effort on the part of one militarized group of males to express and sustain the subordination of a conquered group of males. Mass rape in warfare is about the final humiliating appropriation of the conquered group’s property. It is as if to say: “We burn your houses, eat your chickens, and rape your women. We have fully and completely conquered you.”

And what about rape not as a crime to be punished but as the *restitution* for a crime that has been committed? In June 2002, a Pakistani woman, Mukhtar Mai, was gang-raped in a small village in southern Punjab. She was ordered to be raped by a local judicial council as punishment for nonmarital sex. Except she didn’t actually have nonmarital sex—her brother did. Or so they believed. Mukhtar was ordered raped because of a crime her brother was said to have committed. (It was later revealed that her brother, age twelve, had himself been abducted and sodomized by three elder tribesmen, who fabricated the sex story as a cover-up.) Were these elder tribesmen tried and convicted of the rape of the twelve-year-old boy? No. Were the men who sentenced Mukhtar Mai to be gang-raped themselves brought to justice? Eventually, after a world outcry against such obvious injustice. Although obviously neither of these rapes could even be remotely tied to some evolutionary strategy for reproductive success, together they reveal the way that rape serves to reproduce male domination. Both the dominance hierarchies among men and the hierarchies that place men over women were revealed in this horrific moment.<sup>21</sup>

In her ethnographic study of a gang rape at the University of Pennsylvania, Peggy Reeves Sanday underscores how a campus gang rape looks surprisingly like this Pakistani judicial council. She suggests that gang rape has its origins in both the gender inequality that allows men to see women as pieces of meat and in men’s needs to demonstrate their masculinity to one another. Gang rape cements the relations among men. But more than that, gang rape permits a certain homoerotic contact between men. When one participant reported his pleasure at feeling the semen of his friends inside

the woman as he raped her, Sanday sensed a distinct erotic component. The woman was the receptacle, the vehicle by which these men could have sex with one another and still claim heterosexuality. Only in a culture that degrades and devalues women could such behaviors take place. Rape, then, is hardly an evolutionary strategy by which less-successful males get to pass on their reproductive inheritance. It is an act that occurs only in those societies where there is gender inequality and by men who may be quite “successful” in other forms of mating but believe themselves entitled to violate women. It is about *gender*, not about *sex*, and it is a way in which gender inequality produces gender difference.<sup>22</sup>

### RITUALS OF GENDER

One of the ways by which anthropologists have explored the cultural construction of gender is by examining specific gender rituals. Their work suggests that the origins of these rituals lie in nonbiological places. Because questions of reproduction and child rearing loom so large in the determination of gender inequality, it makes sense that a lot of these rituals are concerned with reproduction. And because spatial segregation seems to be highly associated with gender difference and gender inequality, ritual segregation—either in space or time—may have also been a focus of attention. For example, the initiation of young males has been of particular concern, in part because of the relative disappearance of such formal cultural rituals in the contemporary United States. Initiation rituals provide a sense of identity and group membership to the men who participate in them. Many cultures, especially settled agricultural and pastoral societies, include circumcision, the excision of the foreskin of a boy’s penis, in a ritual incorporating a male into the society. The age of this ritual varies; one survey of twenty-one cultures that practice circumcision found that four perform it in infancy, ten when the boy is about ten years old (before puberty), six perform it at puberty, and one waits until late adolescence.

Why would so many cultures determine that membership in the world of adult men requires genital mutilation? Indeed, circumcision is the most common medical procedure in the United States. Theories, of course, abound. In the Jewish Bible, circumcision is a visible sign of the bond between God and man, a symbol of man’s obedience to God’s law. (In Genesis 17:10–11, 14, God commands Abraham to circumcise Isaac as a covenant.) But circumcision also seems to have been seen as a way of acquiring a trophy. Successful warriors would cut off their foes’ foreskins to symbolize their victory and to permanently disfigure and humiliate the vanquished foe. (In I Samuel 18:25, King Saul demands that David slay one hundred enemies and bring back their foreskins as a bride-price. David, a bit overeager, brings back two hundred.)

In other cultures, ethnographers suggest that circumcision creates a visible scar that binds men to one another and serves as a rite of passage to adult masculinity. Whiting, Kluckhohn, and Anthony argue that it symbolically serves to sever a boy’s emotional ties to his mother, and therefore to assure appropriate masculine identification. Other writers point out that cultures that emphasize circumcision of young males tend to be those where both gender differentiation and

gender inequality are greatest. Circumcision, which is always a public ceremony, simultaneously cements the bonds between father (and his generation) and son (and his generation), links the males together, and excludes women, visibly and demonstrably. Circumcision, then, tends to be associated with male domination.<sup>23</sup> As do other forms of male genital mutilation. In a very few cultures, for example, the penis is ritually bled by cutting. Such cultures still believe in bleeding as a cure for illness—in this case, illness brought about by sexual contact with women, who are believed to be impure and infectious. And we know of four cultures that practice hemicastration, the removal of one testicle. In one culture, people believe it prevents the birth of twins.<sup>24</sup>

Female circumcision is also practiced in several cultures, though far fewer than practice male circumcision. This circumcision consists either of clitoridectomy, in which the clitoris is cut away, or infibulation, in which the labia majora are sewn together with only a very small opening left to allow for urination. It is interesting that female circumcision is often performed by adult women. In other cultures, it is performed by the brother of the girl's father. Clitoridectomy is widespread in Africa but few other places, and it invariably takes place in societies that also practice male circumcision. Infibulation seems to be most widely practiced in East Africa and Somalia, and its goal is to prevent sexual intercourse, whereas the goal of clitoridectomy is simply to prevent sexual pleasure and thereby sexual promiscuity. It is estimated by the World Health Organization that 130 million girls and women have undergone some form of cutting of the clitoris (figure 3.4).<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 3.4.** Female genital alterations. From Edgar Gregersen, *Sexual Practices* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983). Used with permission.

## Female Circumcision

Here is a description of female circumcision from one who underwent it, a Sudanese woman now working as a teacher in the Middle East:

I will never forget the day of my circumcision, which took place forty years ago. I was six years old. One morning during my school summer vacation, my mother told me that I had to go with her to her sisters' house and then to visit a sick relative in Halfayat El Mulook [in the northern part of Khartoum, Sudan]. We did go to my aunt's house, and from there all of us went straight to [a] red brick house [I had never seen].

While my mother was knocking, I tried to pronounce the name that was on the door. Soon enough I realized that it was Haija Alamin's house. She was the midwife [who performed circumcisions on girls in my neighborhood]. I was petrified and tried to break loose. But I was captured and subdued by my mother and two aunts. They began to tell me that the midwife was going to purify me.

The midwife was the cruelest person I had seen...[She] ordered her young maid to go buy razors from the Yemeni grocer next

door. I still remember her when she came back with the razors, which were enveloped in purple wrappings with a crocodile drawing on it.

The women ordered me to lie down on a bed [made of ropes] that had a little hole in the middle. They held me tight while the midwife started to cut my flesh without anesthetics. I screamed till I lost my voice. The midwife was saying to me "Do you want me to be taken into police custody?" After the job was done I could not eat, drink, or even pass urine for three days. I remember one of my uncles who discovered what they did to me threatened to press charges against his sisters. They were afraid of him and they decided to bring me back to the midwife. In her sternest voice she ordered me to squat on the floor and urinate. It seemed like the most difficult thing to do at that point, but I did it. I urinated for a long time and was shivering with pain.

It took a very long time [before] I was back to normal. I understand the motives of my mother, that she wanted me to be clean, but I suffered a lot.<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting that both cultures that circumcise men and those that circumcise women tend to be those where men's status is highest. The purpose of the ritual reveals some of this difference. For men, the ritual is a marking that simultaneously shows that all men are biologically *and culturally* alike—and that they are different from women. Thus it can be seen as reinforcing male dominance. Historically, there was some evidence that male circumcision was medically beneficial, because it reduced the possibilities of penile infection by removing the foreskin, a place where bacteria could congregate. This is no longer the case; rates of penile infection or urethral cancer show no differences between those men who have and have not been circumcised. Among advanced industrial societies, only in the United States are the majority of men circumcised, although that rate has dropped from over 95 percent in the 1960s to about 66 percent today. Australia has the second-highest rate, about 10 percent.

For women, circumcision has never been justified by medical benefits; it directly impedes adequate sexual functioning and is designed to curtail sexual pleasure. Female circumcision is nearly always performed when women reach the age of puberty, that is, when they are capable of experiencing sexual pleasure, and seems to be associated with



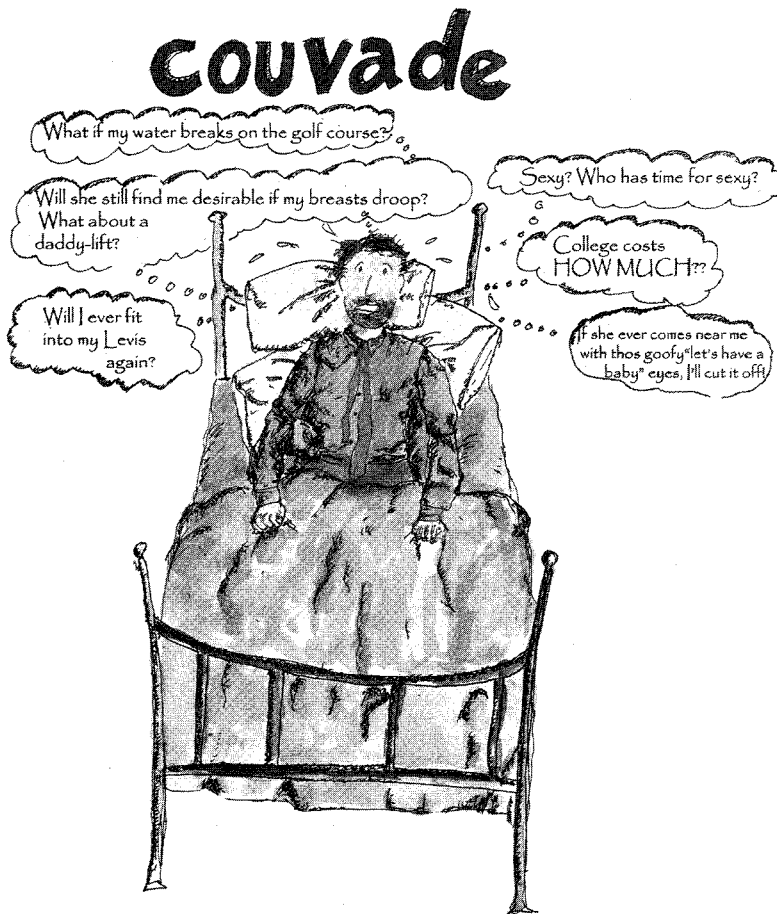
men's control over women's sexuality. Currently, political campaigns are being waged to prohibit female circumcision as a violation of women's human rights. In Kenya, some women have developed alternative rituals to enable girls to come of age without any forms of genital mutilation. For example, "Cutting Through Words" is one ritual that provides a celebration of adulthood that honors the girl and her family. "We need to tread carefully since female genital mutilation is deeply rooted into the culture," says Priscilla Nangurai, headmistress of a church-sponsored girls boarding school who has been one of the advocates of change. "We can end it through education, advocacy and religion."<sup>27</sup>

However, many defenders of female circumcision suggest that such campaigns are motivated by Western values. They insist that afterward women are revered and respected as members of the culture. (There are no widespread political campaigns against male circumcision, though some individuals have recently begun to rethink the ritual as a form of genital mutilation, and a few men are even undergoing a surgical procedure designed to replace the lost foreskin.)<sup>28</sup> Others counter that the right to control one's own body is a fundamental human right and that cultures that practice such behaviors must conform to universal standards.

One of the more interesting theories about the prevalence of these reproductive and sexual rituals has been offered by Jeffrey and Karen Paige in their book, *The Politics of Reproductive Ritual*. Paige and Paige offer a materialist interpretation of these rituals, locating the origins of male circumcision, couvade, and purdah in the culture's relationship with its immediate material environment. Take couvade, for example (figure 3.5). This is a ritual that men observe when their wives are having babies. Generally, the men observe the same food taboos as their wives, restrict their ordinary activities, and even seclude themselves during their wives' delivery and postpartum period. What could possibly be the point of this? Some might think it is anthropologically "cute," as the men often even imitate the symptoms of pregnancy, in apparent sympathy for their wives. But Paige and Paige see it differently. They argue that couvade is significant in cultures where there are no legal mechanisms to keep the couple together or to assure paternity. Couvade is a way for men to fully claim paternity, to know that the baby is theirs. It is also a vehicle by which the men can control women's sexuality by appropriating control over paternity.<sup>29</sup>

### Oh Really?

Women everywhere adorn themselves with jewelry, makeup and other fashion accessories in order to be more attractive to men. Actually, there are many cultures in which it's the *males* who adorn themselves and parade around for women's approval. In one culture, the Wodaabe of Niger, each year the men dress up in ceremonial garb, paint their faces and lips, and parade in front of the unadorned women, who sit in judgment of them men, deciding which one they will sleep with. (The opening photo of this chapter shows the men's dance.) The Wodaabe prize height, white teeth, and white eyes—all signs of health—so the men desperately try to set off their teeth (by staining their lips black), stand on tiptoes, and open their eyes as wide as possible.



**Figure 3.5.** Courtesy of Kathleen Moore/moorestories.com.

Paige and Paige also examine the politics of *purdah*, the Islamic requirement that women conceal themselves at all times (figure 3.6). Ostensibly, this requirement is to protect women's chastity and men's honor—women must be completely covered because they “are so sexy, so tempting, so incapable of controlling their emotions and sexuality, the men say, that they are a danger to the social order.” It is as if by concealing women, men can harness women's sexuality. But this is only half the story. It also suggests that *men* are so susceptible to temptation, so incapable of resistance, such easy prey, that they are likely to fall into temptation at any time. In order to protect women from *men's* sexual rapaciousness, men must control women and take away the source of the temptation.<sup>30</sup>

#### **HOW MANY GENDERS ARE THERE?**

We've explored the relationship between levels of gender difference and levels of inequality. But in some cultures, gender itself doesn't seem to be that important,



**Figure 3.6.** Courtesy of Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

certainly not the central organizing principle of social life. In fact, it hardly matters at all. What accounts for that difference?

The discussion of gender difference often assumes that differences are based on some biological realities that sort physical creatures into their appropriate categories. Thus we assume that because there are two biological sexes (male and female), there must only be two genders (men and women). But some research challenges such bipolar assumptions. Some societies recognize more than two genders—sometimes three or four. Research on Native American cultures is particularly fascinating and provocative. The Navaho, for example, appear to have three genders—one for masculine men, one for feminine women, and another, called the *nadle*, for those whose sex is ambiguous at birth. One can decide to become a *nadle* or be born one; either way, *nadles* perform tasks assigned to both women and men and dress as the gender whose tasks they are performing, though they are typically treated as women and addressed using feminine kinship terms. But let's not jump to conclusions: Being treated as a woman is a promotion, not a demotion, in Navaho society, where women historically have had higher status than men and are accorded special rights and privileges, including sexual freedom, control over property, and authority to mediate disputes. *Nadles* are free to marry either males or females, with no loss of status (figure 3.7).<sup>31</sup>



**Figure 3.7.** This remarkable photograph is titled “Squaw Jim and his Squaw.” On the left is Squaw Jim, a biological male in woman’s attire—a Crow *berdache* or male homosexual, afforded distinctive social and ceremonial status within the tribe. In addition to the special attributes that distinguished the *berdache* or *bote*, Squaw Jim served as an enlisted scout at Fort Keogh and achieved a reputation for bravery when he saved the life of a tribesman at the Battle of the Rosebud, June 17, 1876. This image is the earliest known photograph of a North American Indian *berdache*. Photograph by John H. Fouch, 1877. Courtesy of Dr. James S. Brust.

Another custom among some Native American cultures is the *berdache*, which is also found in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. *Berdaches* are members of one biological sex who adopt the gender identity of the other sex, although such a practice is far more common for males than for females. In his pathbreaking study, *The Spirit and the Flesh*, anthropologist Walter Williams explored the world of the *berdache* in detail. These are men who dress, work, and generally act as women—though everyone knows that they are biologically males. Among the Crow in North America, the *berdache* are simply males who do not want to become warriors (figure 3.8a, b).<sup>32</sup>

In southern Mexico, indigenous communities in the state of Oaxaca allow for a third gender, called *muxe* (a Zapotec word derived from the Spanish word *mujer* or woman) figure 3.8. Like the others, these are males who feel themselves, from an early age, to be more like women. Not only does the community accept them, but they are embraced as especially gifted, artistic, and intelligent.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 3.8a.** Carmelo Lopez Bernal, 13, lives with his grandmother and does not go to school, working instead cleaning the homes of relatives and other neighbors. Carmelo has begun to identify himself as a girl and is excited to grow up and become like “Mistica,” a well-known *muxe* in Juchitán. Photo courtesy of Katie Orlinsky, *New York Times*.



**Figure 3.8b.** Carlos leaves the dance floor at a *vela* in Unión Hidalgo, his first appearance in the identity of a girl. “I feel normal about it,” says his grandmother, “it is how God sent him, and I love him even though he isn’t a woman. Who knows what kind of person he will be, he is still young.” Photo courtesy of Katie Orlinsky, *New York Times*.

Some grow up to be gay, some straight. What is clear, and most important to us here, is that the *muxe* represent a distinct *gender* not necessarily a gay masculinity. In that sense, they might be considered transgendered, but not necessarily homosexual.

Consider how we treat males who dress and act like women. We treat them like freaks or deviants or assume they must be homosexual. They are outcasts; acting like a *berdache* in this culture is not recommended if you value your health and your life.

Among the Native American cultures of the Great Plains, though, the *berdaches* are revered as possessed of special powers, enjoy high social and economic status, and frequently control the tribe's ritual life. The reasoning is straightforward and logical: By being men who act like women, the *berdaches* are sexually indifferent to women, something that other men are not capable of being. Surely, they must be possessed of some supernatural power to be able to resist the charms of females! Only the *berdache* can be counted on to administer fairly without seeking to advance his claim on a specific woman whom he might fancy.

Anthropologist Sabine Lang documented the wide range of cross-gender activities engaged in by *berdaches* in Native American cultures (figure 3.9).<sup>34</sup> There is one case of what might be called "female *berdaches*." Among the Nahane, a Native American culture, a husband and wife might decide that they had too many daughters and too few sons to hunt for them when they got old. They would choose one of their daughters to live like a man. When she was about five years old, the dried ovaries of a bear were tied to her belt, and she was treated as if she were a boy from then on. As an adult, she would most likely have lesbian sexual relations.<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 3.9.** Components of the woman-man (male-bodied *berdache*) role. From Sabine Lang, *Men as Women, Women as Men*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 256.

The Mohave seemed to have four genders and permitted both women and men to cross genders to carefully demarcated roles. A boy who showed preferences for feminine clothing or toys would undergo a different initiation at puberty and become an *alyha*. He would then adopt a female name, paint his face as a woman, perform female roles, and marry a man. When they married, the *alyha* would cut his upper thigh every month to signify “his” menstrual period, and he would learn how to simulate pregnancy and childbirth. Martin and Voorhies suggest how this was accomplished:

Labor pains, induced by drinking a severely constipating drug, culminate in the birth of a fictitious stillborn child. Stillborn Mohave infants are customarily buried by the mother, so that an *alyha*’s failure to return to “her” home with a living infant is explained in a culturally acceptable manner.<sup>36</sup>

If a Mohave female wanted to cross genders, she would undergo an initiation ceremony to become a *hwame*. *Hwame* lived men’s lives—hunting, farming, and the like—and assumed paternal responsibility for children, though they were prohibited from assuming positions of political leadership. Neither *hwame* nor *alyha* was considered deviant.

In the Middle East, we find a group of Omani males called “*xanith*” who are biologically males, but whose social identity is female. They work as skilled domestic servants, dress in men’s tunics (but in pastel shades more associated with feminine colors), and sell themselves in passive homosexual relationships. They are permitted to speak with women on the street (other men are prohibited). At sex-segregated public events, they sit with the women. However, they can change their minds—and their gender experiences. If they want to be seen as males, they are permitted to do so, and they then may engage in heterosexual sex. Others simply grow older and eventually quit the homosexual prostitution; they are then permitted to become “social men.” Some “become” women, even going as far as marrying men. And still others move back and forth between these positions throughout their lives, suggesting a fluidity of gender identity that would be unthinkable to those who believe in biological determinism.

### SEXUAL DIVERSITY

These studies of gender fluidity are complemented by studies of sexual variation. Taken together, they provide powerful arguments about the cultural construction of both gender and sexuality. Anthropologists have explored remarkable sexual diversity and thus have suggested that biological arguments about the naturalness of some activities and arrangements may be dramatically overstated. Take homosexuality, which evolutionary biologists would suggest is a biological “aberration” if ever there were one, because homosexuality is not reproductive, and the goal of all sexual activity is to pass on one’s genetic code to the next generation. Not only is homosexual activity ubiquitous in the animal kingdom, but also it is extraordinarily common in human cultures—so common, in fact, that it would appear to be “natural.” What varies is not the presence or absence of homosexuality—those are pretty much constants—but the ways in which homosexuals are treated in those cultures. We’ve already seen that many cultures honor and respect those who transgress gender definitions and adopt the gender of the other

sex. Some of these might be considered “homosexual,” if your definition of “homosexual” has to do only with the biological sex of your sex partner.

Even by that definition, though, we find astonishing variation in the ways in which homosexuals are regarded. In 1948, anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn surveyed North American Indian tribes and found homosexuality accepted by 120 of them and rejected by 54. Some cultures (Lango in East Africa, Koniag in Alaska, and Tanala in Madagascar) allow homosexual marriages between men. Some cultures have clearly defined homosexual roles for men and women, with clearly defined expectations.<sup>37</sup>

In a remarkable ethnography, Gilbert Herdt described the sexual rituals of the Sambia, a mountain people who live in Papua New Guinea. The Sambia practice ritualized homosexuality as a way to initiate young boys into full adult manhood. Young boys ritually daily fellate the older boys and men so that the younger boys can receive the vital life fluid (semen) from the older men and thus become men. “A boy must be initiated and [orally] inseminated, otherwise the girl betrothed to him will outgrow him and run away to another man,” was the way one Sambia elder put it. “If a boy doesn’t eat semen, he remains small and weak.” When they reach puberty, these boys are then fellated by a new crop of younger boys. Throughout this initiation, the boys scrupulously avoid girls and have no knowledge of heterosexuality until they are married. Neither the boys nor the older men think of themselves as engaging in homosexual behavior: The older men are married to women, and the younger men fully expect to be. There is no adult homosexuality among the Sambia. But these young boys must become, as Herdt puts it, “reluctant warriors.” How else are the boys to receive the vital life force that will enable them to be real men and warriors?<sup>38</sup>

Nearby, also in Melanesia, are the Keraki, who engage in a related practice. There, the boys are sodomized by older men, because the Keraki believe that without the older men’s semen, the boys will not grow to be men. This ritual practice occurs until the boys enter puberty and secondary sex characteristics appear—facial hair, dropped voice—at which point the ritual has accomplished its task. When an anthropologist asked Keraki men if they had been sodomized, many responded by saying, “Why, yes! Otherwise how should I have grown?” Other ritualized homosexual practices have been reported from other cultures.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, such ritual practices, as among the Sambia and Keraki, are more evident in cultures in which sex segregation is high and women’s status is low. This conforms to other ethnographic evidence that suggests that elaborate rituals of male bonding have the effect of excluding women from ritual life and thus correlate with women’s lower status. Sex segregation is almost always associated with lower status for women—whether among the Sambia or among cadets at the Citadel.<sup>40</sup>

If all this sounds extraordinarily exotic, remember this: In every major city in the United States, there is a group of young men, many of whom are married and virtually all of whom consider themselves to be heterosexual, who have sex with other men for money. These gay hustlers will perform only certain acts (anal penetration) or will allow only certain acts (they permit their clients to fellate them but will not reciprocate). By remaining the “insertor” in homosexual acts, these men do not identify as homosexual, but rather as men. Men are insertors, whether with women or with men, so as long as they remain insertors, they believe their masculinity is not compromised. “Objectively,” you may argue, they are engaging in gay sex. But by their definition, homosexuality equals passivity in sexual contact, having sex like a woman. And by that definition, they



are not having gay sex. Whatever you might make of this, though, suddenly the Sambia do not look completely alien; they look more like distant cousins.

Some cultures take permissiveness regarding homosexuality to a remarkable level. Among the Aranda of Australia, Siwans of northern Africa, and Keraki of New Guinea, every male is homosexual during adolescence and bisexual after marriage. The purpose of this is to divert adolescent sex away from young girls and prevent teenage pregnancy and therefore to keep the birth rate down in cultures that have very scarce resources. The well-studied Yanomamo have an institutionalized form of male homosexuality as well as female infanticide. This warrior culture fears population explosion and the depletion of resources to females.<sup>41</sup>

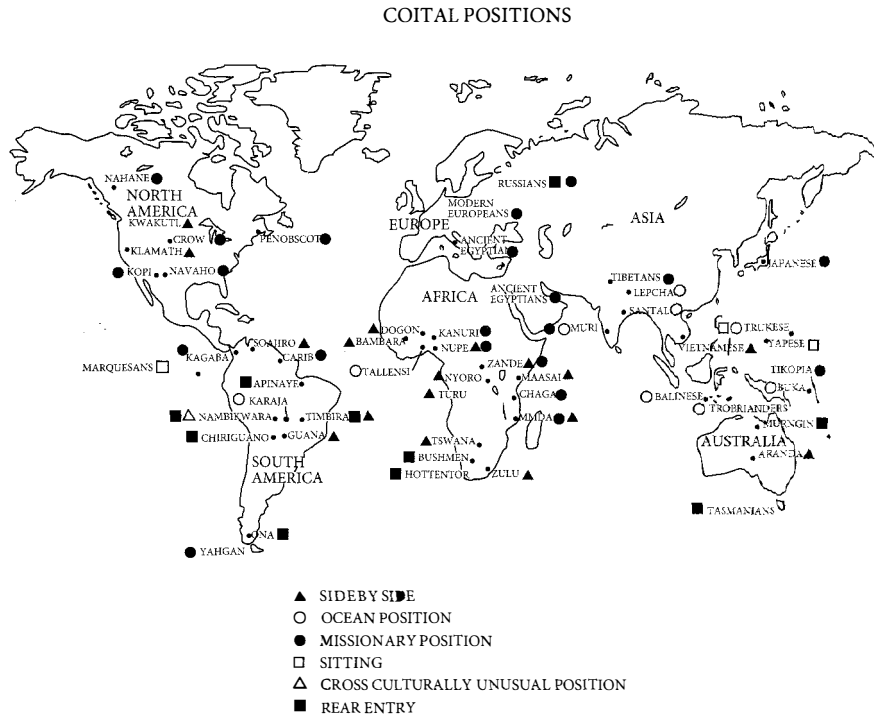
The Etero and the Marind-anim, both in New Guinea, prefer homosexuality to heterosexuality, even though they maintain heterosexual marriages. How, you might ask, do they solve the problem of reproduction? The Etero place a taboo on heterosexual sex for most of the year but prohibit gay sex when the moon is full (and thus when all the women are ovulating). For the Marind-anim, even that much sexual contact with the opposite sex is undesirable. Their birth rate is so low that this warrior culture organizes raids every year, during which it kidnaps the babies of other cultures, raising them to be happy, healthy—and, of course, homosexual—Marind-anim.<sup>42</sup>

One Melanesian society, called “East Bay” in William Davenport’s ethnographic study, practices full adult bisexuality. Nearly every male has extensive homosexual sexual contact throughout his life, though all are also heterosexual and married to women. (None is exclusively homosexual, only a few exclusively heterosexual.) Women and men are seen as relatively equal in terms of sexual drive, and there are no taboos against contact with women.<sup>43</sup>

### **SEXUAL CUSTOMS AS GENDER DIVERSITY**

Sexual customs display a dizzying array that, all elements taken together, implies that sexual behavior is anything but organized around reproduction alone. Where, when, how, and with whom we have sex vary enormously from culture to culture. Ernestine Friedel, for example, observed dramatic differences in sexual customs between two neighboring tribes in New Guinea. One, a highland tribe, believes that intercourse makes men weaker and that women are naturally prone to tempt men, threatening them with their powerful sexuality. They also find menstrual blood terrifying. These sexual ideologies pit women against men, and many men would rather remain bachelors than risk contact with women. As a result, population remains relatively low, which this culture needs because it has no new land or resources to bring under cultivation. Not far away, however, is a very different culture. Here, both men and women enjoy sex and sex play. Men worry about whether women are sexually satisfied, and they get along relatively well. They have higher birth rates, which is manageable because they live in a relatively abundant and uncultivated region, where they can use all the hands they can get to farm their fields and defend themselves.<sup>44</sup>

Sex researchers have explored the remarkable cultural diversity of sexual behaviors and in so doing have exposed the ethnocentrism of those arguments that stress the inevitability and naturalness of our own behaviors (figure 3.10). Take the typical American couple, Mr. and Mrs. Statistical Average. They’re white, middle-aged, married, and have sex about twice a week, at night, in their bedroom, alone, with the lights



**Figure 3.10.** Coital positions. From Edgar Gregerson, *Sexual Practices*. (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983). Used with permission. Source: Gregerson.

off, in the “missionary position”—the woman on her back, facing the man, who lies on top of her. The encounter—from the “Do you want to?” to kissing, foreplay, intercourse (always in that order), and finally to “Goodnight, sweetheart”—lasts about fifteen minutes. Now consider other cultures: Some cultures never have sex outside. Others believe that having sex indoors would contaminate the food supply (usually in the same hut). What about our rates of sexual contact? The Zande have sex two or three times a night and then once again upon awakening. Chaga men have about ten orgasms a night, and Thonga men try to have sex with as many as three or four of their wives each night. But few beat the Marquesa: Although it’s not uncommon for a Marquesan man to have thirty or more orgasms a night, it is normal to have at least ten. Older married men are exempted: They have only about three or four a night. By contrast, the Yapese have sex only once a month or so. During this encounter, the man sits with his back against the side of the hut and his legs straight out. The woman straddles him, and he inserts his penis into her vagina a little bit and then proceeds to stimulate her for several hours while she has dozens of orgasms.<sup>45</sup>

Whereas for us kissing is a virtually universal initiation of sexual contact—“first base,” as it were—other cultures find it disgusting because of the possibility of exchanging saliva. “Putting your lips together?” say the Thonga or the Siriono. “But that’s where you put food!” Some cultures practice almost no foreplay at all, but instead go directly

to intercourse; others prescribe several hours of touching and caressing, in which intercourse is a necessary but sad end to the proceedings. Some cultures include oral sex in their lovemaking; others have never even considered it. Alfred Kinsey found that 70 percent of the American men he surveyed in 1948 had had sex only in the missionary position and that 85 percent had an orgasm within two minutes of penetration. In his survey of 131 Native American cultures, Clyde Kluckhohn found the missionary position preferred in only 17.<sup>46</sup>

In our culture, it is men who are supposed to be the sexual initiators and women who are supposed to be sexually resistant. We've all heard stories about men giving women aphrodisiacs to make them more sexually uninhibited. The latest is Rohypnol, the "date rape drug," which men apparently put into unsuspecting women's drinks to make them more "compliant" or at least unconscious (which, in these men's minds, may amount to the same thing). How different are the Trobriand Islanders, where women are seen as sexually insatiable and take the initiative. Or the Tukano-Kubeo in Brazil. Here, women are the sexual aggressors and may even avoid getting pregnant or abort a pregnancy because pregnancy would mean forgoing sex. Women, not men, commit adultery, but women justify it by saying that it was "only sex." Tukano-Kubeo men secretly give the women aphrodisiacs to cool them down.<sup>47</sup>

These are but a few examples. When questioned about their practices people in these cultures give the same answers we would. "It's normal," they'll say. And they've developed the same kind of self-justifying arguments that we have. The Bambara, for example, believe that having sex during the day would produce albino children, whereas the Masai believe daytime sex can be fatal. So members of these cultures have sex only at night, and apparently, there are no albinos born and no fatalities during sex. The Chenchu, by contrast, believe that sex at night will lead to the birth of blind babies. So they have sex only during the day and thus avoid having blind children. The Yurok believe that practicing cunnilingus would keep the salmon from running. No oral sex, no shortage of salmon. Such sexual variety suggests that the biological imperative toward reproduction can take many forms but that none is more "natural" than any other.

### **ANTHROPOLOGY AS HISTORY**

Anthropological research has helped to expose the faulty logic of those who argue that the universality of gender difference or of male domination is somehow natural and inevitable. By exploring the variety of meanings that has accompanied the cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity and by examining cultural configurations that either magnify or diminish gender inequality, cross-cultural research has taken us beyond apparent biological imperatives. In another sense, anthropological research on our human ancestors has also provided a historical retort to biological inevitability. Take, for example, the arguments we saw earlier that male domination was a natural development in the shift to hunting-and-gathering societies. Remember the story: Men's superior physical strength led them naturally toward hunting, whereas weaker women stayed home and busied themselves with gardening and child rearing. Tidy and neat—but also, it appears, historically wrong.

It turns out that such stories actually read history backward, from the present to the past, seeking the historical origins of the patterns we find today. But recent

research suggests that meat made up a rather small portion of the early human diet, which meant that all that celebrated hunting didn't count for much at all. And those weapons men invented, the great technological breakthrough that enabled cultures to develop—placing cultural development squarely on the backs of men? Turns out that the great technological leap was more likely slings that women with babies developed so they could carry both baby and food. It may even be true that the erect posture of human beings derives not from the demands of hunting, but rather from the shift from foraging for food to gathering and storing it. Although celebrants of “masculinist” evolution credited the demands of the hunt for creating the necessity of social (male) bonding for the survival of the community, surely it is the bond between mother and infant that literally and materially ensures survival. Painting a more accurate anthropological picture would require that we acknowledge that females were not simply passive and dependent bearers of children, but rather were active participants in the technological and economic side of life.<sup>48</sup>

Another way to look at this is suggested by Helen Fisher. She notes startling similarities between contemporary American culture and early human cultures. The elements we have inherited as the biologically natural system—nuclear families, marriages with one partner for life, the dramatic separation of home and workplace—all seem to be relatively recent cultural inventions that accompany settled agricultural societies. On the other hand, divorce and remarriage, institutionalized child care, and women and men working equally both at home and away are more typical of the hunting-and-gathering societies that preceded ours—and lasted for millions of years. It may be, Fisher suggests, that after a brief evolutionary rest stop in settled agricultural domain (during which time male domination, warfare, and monotheism all developed), we are returning to our “true” human evolutionary origins. “As we head back to the future,” she suggests, “there’s every reason to believe the sexes will enjoy the kind of equality that is a function of our birthright.”<sup>49</sup>

If this sounds a bit too mythical, there is a school of feminist anthropology that goes much further. Most anthropologists agree with Michelle Rosaldo, who concluded that “human cultural and social forms have always been male dominated,” or with Bonnie Nardi, who finds “no evidence of truly egalitarian societies. In no societies do women participate on an equal footing with men in activities accorded the highest prestige.”<sup>50</sup> But one school of feminist anthropologists sees such universality as “an ethnological delusion,” and this school argues that there have been, and are, societies in which women and men have been, and are, equal. What’s more, there also may have been societies in which women were the dominant sex. Based on archeological excavations in Crete and elsewhere, Marija Gimbutas and Riane Eisler and others have argued that Neolithic societies were goddess-worshipping, gender-equal, virtual Gardens of Eden, in which women and men may have occupied separate spheres but were equal and mutually respectful. Symbolized, Eisler writes, by the chalice—the symbol of shared plenty—these ancient peoples evidenced a “partnership” model of human interaction.<sup>51</sup>

Then, the story goes, the barbarians invaded, instituting male domination, introducing a single omnipotent male God, and unleashing “the lethal power of the blade”—a violent and hierarchical world drenched in the blood of war and murder. We’ve been living under such a brutal dominator model—“in which male dominance, male violence, and a generally hierarchic and authoritarian social structure was the norm”—ever since.

In such a world, “having violently deprived the Goddess and the female half of humanity of all power, gods and men of war ruled,” Eisler writes, and “peace and harmony would be found only in the myths and legends of a long lost past.”<sup>52</sup>

Another just-so story? Perhaps. I’m always skeptical of arguments that point to a dimly lit historical past for our models of future social reformation, because they so often rely on selective evidence and often make for retrogressive politics. And I’m equally uneasy with sweeping categorizations of “female” peace-loving cultures being swept aside by brutally violent “male” ones. After all, the contemporary world, for all its murderous, rapacious, and bloodthirsty domination, is *far* less violent than hunter-gatherer societies. Ethnographic data suggest that only about 10 percent of societies rarely engage in war; most cultures are engaged in conflict either continuously or more than once a year. The !Kung bushmen celebrated by Eisler as the “harmless people” have a murder rate higher than that of Detroit or Washington, D.C. “The sad archeological evidence,” writes Francis Fukuyama, “indicates that systematic mass killings of men, women, and children occurred in Neolithic times. There was no age of innocence.”<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, why would we want to believe that male domination is somehow natural and inevitable? Some of Eisler’s arguments are on firm evolutionary footing: It is likely, for example, that descent was originally traced through matrilinearity. This would make descent far more certain in cultures that did not understand the relationship between sexual intercourse and birth nine months later. And one can believe the credible evidence that women played a greater role in early human societies, without assuming one momentous calamity of invasion when that Edenic world was forever lost.

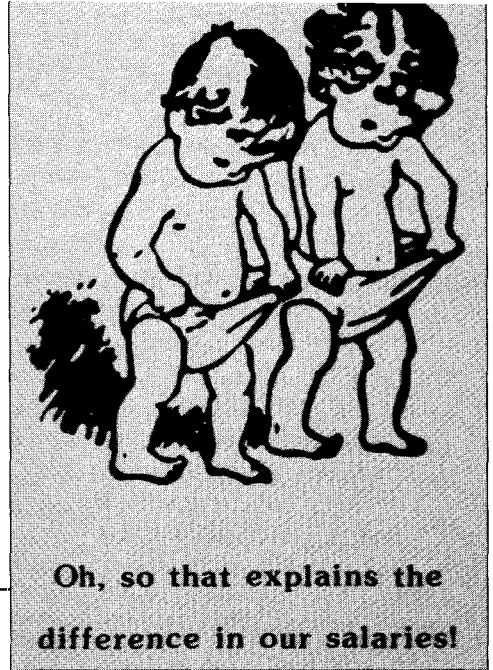
There is even some evidence of cultures that, although not fully female-dominated, evince women’s power in all public and private arenas. Maria Lepowsky’s impressive ethnography of the Vanatinai, a matrilineal, decentralized culture in New Guinea, found no evidence of male domination—no men’s huts, no special ceremonial cults. Boys as well as girls care for their younger siblings. Men do child care. And both women and men exercise sexual freedom. Women have, Lepowsky writes, “equal opportunities of access to the symbolic capital of prestige derived from success in exchange.” That is, both women’s and men’s economic participation gives everyone equal possibilities of prestige and honor. It depends on what you do, not what biological sex you are.<sup>54</sup>

Peggy Sanday’s fascinating study of the matrilineal Minangkabau of western Sumatra, one of the largest ethnic groups in Indonesia, is a case in point. Instead of looking for a mirror-image world, in which women wield power as men do, Sanday finds instead a culture in which women’s ways of governing parallel men’s ways and at times even supplant men’s ways. Here, women are self-confident and independent of their husbands, and although men hold many of the formal political offices, women “rule without governing.” They “facilitate social bonding outside the machinations of political power,” which enables “the men’s job of adjudicating disputes according to the rules of adat [customs] and consensus decision-making.”<sup>55</sup>

Women’s status varies widely, depending on many cultural factors. And that alone makes it clear that male domination is not inevitable.

**THE VALUES OF CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH**

If anthropologists have demonstrated anything, it is the rich diversity in human cultural arrangements and the disparate definitions of gender and sexuality that we have produced within our cultures. Several theories explain the historical origins of these patterns and suggest ways we can modify or abandon some historically coercive or exploitative practices without doing damage to our evolutionary legacy. Cultural relativism also suggests that, in this enormous cultural variety and historical evolution of custom and culture, we shed those customs we no longer need, even if once they served some societal purpose. “Assertions of past inferiority for women should therefore be irrelevant to present and future developments,” writes Eleanor Leacock.<sup>56</sup> Still, questions linger. Given such diversity of sexuality and gender, why is male dominance so universal? If it’s not inevitable, how do we explain its persistence? Here, the answers may be a bit closer to home.



## “So, That Explains It”

### *Psychoanalytic and Developmental Perspectives on Gender*

Upon no subject has there been so much dogmatic assertion based on so little scientific evidence, as upon male and female types of mind.

—JOHN DEWEY

“Is Coeducation Injurious to Girls?” (1911)

The opening cartoon adopts a popular idea about the theories of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. Freud believed that the anatomical differences between males and females led them toward different personalities, that sex did determine temperament. However, he did not believe that such differences were biologically programmed into males and females at birth. On the contrary, Freud saw his work as challenging those who held that the body contained all the information it needed at birth to become an adult man or woman. He believed that the observed differences between women and men were traceable to our different experiences from infancy onward, especially in the ways we were treated in our families.

Gender identity, Freud maintained, was a crucial part of personality development—perhaps *the* most crucial part. Gender was acquired, molded through interactions with family members and with the larger society. And it wasn’t an easy acquisition; the route to appropriate gender identity was perilous and included the

constant possibility of gender identity failure, which was manifested most clearly in sexual nonconformity, especially homosexuality. Of course, biology did play some role here: Freud and his followers believed that visible anatomical differences were decisive in the development of the child and especially that sexual energy, located in the body, propelled the child's experiences that determined gender identity. But the essence of psychological development was "not based on any premise of inherent differences between the sexes, but solely on the different nature of their experiences."<sup>1</sup>

### **FREUD'S THEORY OF PSYCHOSEXUAL DEVELOPMENT**

Freud proposed a stage theory of individual gender development, one in which each individual passes through a number of stages on his or her path to adult gender identity. These stages are set into motion by two factors: the composition or structure of the psyche and the realities of life. Four elements comprise Freud's model of the psyche: id, ego, super-ego, and the external world. These elements together form the basic architecture of the self, and each has a decisive role to play in the formation of personality. The id represents our desire to satisfy our basic animal needs for food, shelter, and pleasure. Id is energy, drive, craving. Id "knows" only that it wants gratification but has neither morality nor the means to acquire what it wants. Freud calls the id "a cauldron filled with seething excitations."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the external world possesses limited possibilities for instinctual gratification; the id's desires are constantly thwarted. How we cope with those frustrations determines personality development. The ego, the rational, problem-solving portion of our personality, takes the impulses of the id and translates them into strategies for gratification that will be effective. The ego must discipline the id, tame it, and seek possible sources of gratification for it. Another part of the psyche, the super-ego, is an outgrowth of ego's efforts to seek socially effective and appropriate outlets for gratification of id's desires. Freud calls it an "internalized externality"—super-ego sees the limited possibilities for gratification offered by society as legitimate. Super-ego is the seat of morality, and it assists the ego in selecting effective strategies toward socially approved goals.

From these four elements, individuals fashion their psychological constitution: their drives for gratification, the limited possibilities offered by the world, the moralizing inner voice that tells them they do not deserve gratification, and the rational strategist that tries to keep all these forces in balance. It is hard work, serving three "tyrannical masters"; as Freud writes, "the ego, driven by the id, confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces and influences working in and upon it; and we can understand how it is that so often we cannot suppress a cry, 'Life is not easy!'"<sup>3</sup> Freud proclaimed that the mission of psychoanalysis is to strengthen the ego, to enable it to win this battle of wills. Not only personality development, but also the future of civilization depends upon it.<sup>4</sup> Unless ego finds socially acceptable directions in which to channel the potentially destructive impulses of the id, we cannot build and sustain the institutions of our culture.

These different components of the self emerge gradually through a child's development as the ego tries to navigate its way through the narrow straits presented by the incessant demands of the id and the imperious claims of the super-ego. In a way, Freud's theory of development is a rather sad story, as each successive stage does not



provide nearly the pleasures of the one it replaces—we grow by giving up things that give us pleasure—and, because ego is often not strong enough to undertake such a struggle, there are the omnipresent dangers of temporary backsliding to earlier stages in our fantasies (neurosis) or a dramatic break with reality and the attempt to live in that earlier stage (psychosis).

Prior to birth, Freud believed, all the infant's desires are gratified; in the womb we are sensuously content. But birth expels us from this enveloping Eden; hungry and alone, we can take nothing for granted. Now the infant transfers gratification to the mother's breast, seeking pleasure through ingesting food. This Freud calls the "oral stage." But just as the ego accommodates itself to this source of gratification, it's removed by weaning. In the next stage, the "anal stage," gratification is achieved not by taking food in but rather by giving food back, as in urination and defecation. These bodily functions are now a source of pleasure, but no sooner do we discover the joys of excretory creation that can compensate for the loss of the breast than we are toilet-trained, forced to repress that source of gratification until it is socially appropriate to do it, until, that is, it's convenient for grown-ups. Finally, after oral denial and anal repression, we reach what Freud calls the "phallic stage." And here's where gender comes in.

Until now, both boys and girls experience roughly the same things. But after the resolution of the anal crisis, our paths diverge sharply. In this stage it is our task to "become" either masculine or feminine. Freud believed that this process is more difficult for boys than for girls, because from the beginning a girl learns to identify with her mother as a female, and this identification remains continuous into adulthood. In contrast, a boy must detach himself from his identification with his mother, *disidentify* with her, and identify with his father, a process that requires unlearning one attachment and forming a new one. This is made more difficult because mothers commonly offer a great deal of affection and caring, whereas fathers are often less affectionate and more authoritarian.

This critical moment for the boy is called the "Oedipal crisis," after the play by Sophocles, *Oedipus, the King*. The resolution of the Oedipal crisis is vital—the boy learns to desire sex with women and to identify as a man. This is crucial in Freudian theory: *The boy achieves gender identity and sexual orientation at the same moment in time*. During the Oedipal stage, the boy desires sexual union with his mother, but he also realizes that he is in competition with his father for her affections. With his sexual desire for his mother thwarted by his father, the little boy sexualizes his fear of the father, believing that if he were to compete sexually with his father, his father would castrate him. The boy's ego resolves this state of terror of castration by transferring the boy's identification from mother to father, so that, symbolically, he can have sexual access to his mother. Thus the boy must break the identification with his mother, repudiate her, and identify with his father. This is a great shock—the mother has been the source of warmth and love and is the object of his desire; the father has been a more distant source of authoritarian power and is the source of the boy's terror. But by identifying with the father the little boy ceases being "feminine" (identified with the mother) and becomes masculine, as he simultaneously becomes heterosexual, symbolically capable of sexual relations with mother-like substitutes. Almost literally, as the 1930s popular song put it, he will "want a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad."

For girls, Freud believed, the path is complementary but not nearly as traumatic. Girls retain their identification with the mother but must renounce their sexual desire for her. They do this by acknowledging that they are incapable of sexual relations with the mother, because they lack the biological equipment that makes such relations possible. This is why Freud believed that women experience "penis envy." The little girl understands that her only chance for sexual gratification is to retain her identification with the mother and to be sexually possessed by a man who can satisfy her so that she can have a baby, which will be her source of feminine gratification. In the process, she transfers the location of sexual gratification from the clitoris (an "atrophied penis," in Freud's terms) to the vagina, i.e., she develops feminine, passive sexuality. Again, gender identity and sexual orientation go hand-in-hand. (Freud did acknowledge that his "insight into these developmental processes in girls is unsatisfactory, incomplete, and vague"—given how it was really an effort to derive some complementary comparison with boys' development and was not a theory of girls' development itself.<sup>5</sup>)

Three issues are worth noting in this account of gender identity and sexuality. First, Freud dislocates gender and sexuality from the realm of biology. There is nothing inevitable about males becoming masculine or females becoming feminine. Gender identity and sexuality are psychological achievements—difficult, precarious, and full of potential pitfalls (an absent father may prevent a boy from transferring his identification from his mother, for example). Gender and sexuality are accomplished within the family, Freud argues, not activated by internal biological clocks.

Second, Freud links gender identity to sexual orientation, making homosexuality a developmental *gender* issue rather than an issue of immorality, sin, or biological anomaly. Homosexuals are simply those who have either failed to renounce identification with the mother in favor of the father (gay men) or those who have failed to retain their ties of identification to the mother (lesbians). (This idea also served as the basis for therapeutic interventions designed to "cure" homosexuals by encouraging gender-appropriate behaviors.) Homosexuality is a kind of proof that something went wrong in the gender identity acquisition path.

Third, Freud restates with new vigor traditional gender stereotypes as if they were the badges of successful negotiation of this perilous journey. A boy must be the sexual initiator and scrupulously avoid all feminine behaviors, lest he be seen as having failed to identify with the father. A girl must become sexually passive, wait for a man to be attracted to her, so that she can be fulfilled as a woman. Femininity means fulfillment not as a lover, but as a mother.

It's important to remember that though Freud postulated homosexuality is the failure of the child to adequately identify with the same-sex parent and is therefore a problem of gender identity development, he did not believe in either the criminal persecution or psychiatric treatment of homosexuals. In fact, when Freud was contacted by a woman whose son was homosexual, he patiently explained why he did not think her son needed to be "cured":

Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation; it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of the sexual function... Many highly respectable individuals of ancient and modern times have been homosexuals, several of the

greatest men among them . . . It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime—and a cruelty too . . .

What analysis can do for your son runs in a different line. If he is unhappy, neurotic, torn by conflicts, inhibited in his social life, analysis may bring him harmony, peace of mind, full efficiency, whether he remains homosexual or gets changed.<sup>6</sup>

It took another forty years before the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental illness.

Today, many popular stereotypes about homosexuality continue to rely on Freudian theories of gender development. Many people believe that homosexuality is a form of gender-nonconformity; that is, effeminate men and masculine women are seen in the popular mind as likely to be homosexual, whereas masculine men's and feminine women's gender-conforming behavior leads others to expect them to be heterosexual. In fact, we often believe we can "read" someone's sexual orientation by observing his or her gender stereotypic behavior, as if really masculine men or really feminine women couldn't possibly be gay or lesbian.

Freud's theories have been subject to considerable debate and controversy. He based his theories about the sexuality of women on a very small sample of upper-middle-class women in Vienna, all of whom were suffering from psychological difficulties that brought them to treatment with him in the first place. (Freud rejected the idea that they had been the victims of sexual abuse and incest, although many of them claimed they had been.) His theories of male development were based on even fewer clinical cases and on his own recollections of his childhood and his dreams. These are not the most reliable scientific methods, and his tendency to make sexuality the driving force of all individual development and all social and group processes may tell us more about his own life, and perhaps contemporary Vienna, than about other societies and cultures. Some researchers have argued that many of Freud's patients were actually telling the truth about their sexual victimization and not fantasizing about it and that, therefore, it is not the fantasies of children but rather the actual behavior of adults that forms the constituent elements in the construction of children's sexual view of the world.<sup>7</sup>

Although many today question Freud's theories on methodological, political, or theoretical grounds, there is no question that these theories have had a remarkable impact on contemporary studies and on popular assumptions about the relationship between gender identity and sexual behavior and sexual orientation. If gender identity and sexual orientation were *accomplished*, not inherent in the individual, then it was the parents' fault if things didn't turn out "right." Magazine articles, child-rearing manuals, and psychological inventories encouraged parents to do the right things and to develop the right attitudes, traits, and behaviors in their children; thus the children would achieve appropriate gender identity and thereby ensure successful acquisition of heterosexual identity.

### THE M-F TEST

In the early 1930s, just three decades after Freud developed his theories, Lewis Terman, a psychology professor at Stanford, and his associate, Catherine Cox Miles, tried to codify masculinity and femininity into their component parts—traits, attitudes, and behaviors. Marshalling all the available diagnostic methods of their time, they produced

a survey, published in 1936 as *Sex and Personality*. Their book presented an inventory of behaviors, attitudes, and traits that enabled parents and teachers to monitor a child's successful acquisition of masculinity or femininity.<sup>8</sup>

Terman and Miles utilized a broad range of empirical measures to test gender identity and constructed a continuum from Masculinity to Femininity, along which any individual could be placed according to answers on a series of questions. (The systematic—even obsessive—enterprise to find all possible measures of gender identity is itself an indication of the perceived significance of successful gender identity.) As a result of inventories like the M-F test, gender identity came to be associated with a particular bundle of attitudes, traits, and behaviors, which, once acquired, could be seen as indicators of successful gender acquisition. When embraced by social science in the 1940s, these inventories became the basis for sex-role theory.

The M-F test was perhaps the single most widely used means to determine successful acquisition of gender identity and was still being used until the 1960s. The test was quite wide-ranging, including Rorschach-like interpretations of inkblots, which were coded for gender appropriateness, as well as identification, sentence completion, and some empirical questions. Here is a small sample of the questions on the M-F test. (If you want to keep your own score on these few items—to make sure that your own gender identity is progressing “normally”—you should score it the way that Terman and Miles suggested in 1936: If the response is “masculine,” give yourself a “+”; if feminine, score with a “-.” Interesting how these little value judgments creep into scientific research!)

*Gendered Knowledge:* In the following completion items there are right and wrong answers, and it was assumed that the more “boyish” would know the right answer to questions 2, 3, and 5 and that the more girlish would know the answers to items 1 and 4. Girls who knew the answers to 2, 3, and 5 would be scored as more “masculine.”

1. Things cooked in grease are: boiled (+), broiled (+), fried (-), roasted (+).
2. Most of our anthracite coal comes from: Alabama (-), Colorado (-), Ohio (-), Pennsylvania (+).
3. The “Rough Riders” were led by: Funston (-), Pershing (-), Roosevelt (+), Sheridan (-).
4. Red goes best with: black (-), lavender (+), pink (+), purple (+).
5. The proportion of the globe covered by water is about: 1/8 (-), 1/4 (-), 1/2 (-), 3/4 (+).

*Gendered Feelings:* The test also included a variety of stimuli that was thought to provoke certain emotions. Respondents were to answer whether these things caused (a) a lot, (b) some, (c) little, or (d) none of the expected emotion. For example:

- Does: being called lazy; seeing boys make fun of old people; seeing someone cheat on an exam make you ANGRY?
- Does: being lost; deep water; graveyards at night; Negroes [this is actually on the list!] make you AFRAID?
- Does: a fly caught on sticky fly paper; a man who is cowardly and can't help it; a wounded deer make you feel PITY?
- Does: boys teasing girls; indulging in “petting”; not brushing your teeth; being a Bolshevik make you feel that a person is WICKED?

[To score this section, give yourself a minus (–) for every answer in which you said the thing caused a lot of the emotion, except for the answer, “being a Bolshevik,” which was obviously serious enough for men to get very emotional about. On all others, including being afraid of “Negroes,” however, high levels of emotion were scored as feminine.]

*Gendered Occupations, Appearances, Books:* The test also included possible careers and their obvious sex-typing, such as librarian, auto racer, forest ranger, florist, soldier, and music teacher. There were lists of character traits (loud voices, men with beards, tall women) that those tested were asked to like or dislike, and a list of children’s books (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, *Little Women*, *Biography of a Grizzly*) that they either liked, didn’t like, or had not read.

*Gendered People:* There was a list of famous people whom one either liked, disliked, or did not know (Bismarck, Lenin, Florence Nightingale, Jane Addams). (Obviously, not having read a book or not knowing about a famous person could be seen as gender confirming or nonconfirming.)

There were also questions about what you might like to draw if you were an artist (ships or flowers), what you might like to write about if you were a newspaper reporter (accidents or theater), and where you might like to travel if you had plenty of money (hunt lions in Africa or study social customs; learn about various religions or see how criminals are treated). Finally, the test included some self-reporting about the respondent’s own behaviors and attitudes. Such yes or no items (here listed with the scoring of a yes answer) included:

- Do you rather dislike to take your bath? (+)
- Are you extremely careful about your manner of dress? (–)
- Do people ever say you talk too much? (+)
- Have you ever been punished unjustly? (+)
- Have you ever kept a diary? (–)

The research by Terman and Miles enabled a new generation of psychologists to construct a continuum between masculinity and femininity, along which any individual could be located, and thereby to chart the acquisition of gender identity by examining the traits, attitudes, and behaviors appropriate to each gender. If a boy or girl exhibited the appropriate traits and attitudes, parents could be reassured that their child was developing normally. If, however, the child scored too high on the “inappropriate” side of the continuum, intervention strategies might be devised to facilitate the adoption of more appropriate behaviors. Artistic boys would be pushed toward rough-and-tumble play; tomboys would be forced into frilly dresses to read quietly a book like *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* instead of climbing a tree. Behind these interventions lay the spectre of the sissy, the homosexual male, who, Terman and Miles and other psychologists believed, had gender identity problems. Following Freud, they believed that homosexuality was a gender disorder. As another psychologist, George W. Henry, wrote in 1937:

In a large majority of . . . cases the tendencies to homosexuality as shown by attitude and behavior can be observed in early childhood. . . . To the extent that his interests, attitude and behavior are out of harmony with his actual sex he is likely to meet with circumstances which will accentuate his deviation. Boys appear to be

## How Parents Can Tell...

The evangelical Christian organization Focus on the Family offers parents several warning signs that might indicate “gender confusion,” which, if left unattended, might lead them on the path toward homosexuality. For boys, age 5 to 11, these may include:

1. A strong feeling that they are “different” from other boys.
2. A tendency to cry easily, be less athletic, and dislike the roughhousing that other boys enjoy.
3. A persistent preference to play female roles in make-believe play.
4. A strong preference to spend time in the company of girls and participate in their games and other pastimes.

5. A susceptibility to be bullied by other boys, who may tease them unmercifully and call them “queer,” “fag,” and gay.
6. A tendency to walk, talk, dress, and even “think” effeminately.
7. A repeatedly stated desire to be—or insistence that he is—a girl.

If your child is experiencing these symptoms, the organization urges you to see professional help.

Source: See [www.focusonyourchild.com/develop/art/A0000684.html](http://www.focusonyourchild.com/develop/art/A0000684.html).

somewhat more vulnerable than girls and if they show undue feminine tendencies special care should be exercised to give them opportunity to develop masculine characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

This notion that gender nonconformity is an indicator of sexual orientation remains a most common assumption. If a boy acts “feminine,” or a girl acts “masculine,” we assume this reveals their sexuality—not some expression of their gender identity. For decades it has served as the basis for pop psychologists’ warnings about “growing up straight” and how to prevent your son from “turning gay.” (Pop psychologists seem far less concerned about girls becoming lesbians.) Today, it’s often the religious right that offers such neo-Freudian warnings.<sup>10</sup>

### Post-Freudian Theories of Gender Development

Freudian psychoanalytic theory spawned several different traditions in psychology. Some developmental psychologists sought to chart the sequences or stages of gender and sexual development, as children pass through psychological stages that correspond to physical changes. Other psychologists used various statistical tests to more precisely measure the differences between males and females at certain ages. Feminist psychoanalysts took Freud and his followers to task for their implicit or explicit use of masculinity as the normative reference against which all developmental stages were plotted and understood. And, finally, some psychologists sought to specify the social requirements for both masculine and feminine sex roles.

Theories of *cognitive development* locate the trigger of gender development and gender identity formation slightly later in life than early childhood. Psychologists of this school argue that children are born more or less gender neutral; that is, no important biological differences between boys and girls at birth explain later gender differences. As they grow, children process new information through “cognitive filters” that

enable them to interpret information about gender. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget examined the developmental sequences in children's self-perception and their views of the world. Children are active participants in their own socialization, Piaget argued, not simply the passive objects of social influence. Piaget applied this model to cognitive development, pointing out the sequences of tasks and mental processes appropriate to children of various ages.<sup>11</sup>

Lawrence Kohlberg applied this Piagetian model of sequential cognitive development to the acquisition of a stable gender identity. One of the central developmental tasks of early childhood, Kohlberg argued, is to label oneself as either male or female. The point in time at which children learn "I am a boy" or "I am a girl" is a point after which self-identification seems fixed. The decision is *cognitive*, part of the pattern of mental growth in the organism. Early in life, children develop a gendered mental filter, after which new information from the social world is interpreted and acted upon in terms of its appropriateness to their gender identity. Even by age two, children have relatively stable and fixed understandings of themselves as gendered, and this categorization, Kohlberg argues, "is basically a cognitive reality judgment rather than a product of social rewards, parental justifications, or sexual fantasies." Things, persons, and activities are labeled, "this is appropriate to who I am" or "this is not appropriate to who I am." Messages coded in certain ways get through to boys, those coded in other ways get through to girls.<sup>12</sup>

According to this theory, children's early gender identities depend on concrete, physical cues like dress, hair style, and body size in their categorization of the world into two genders. Boys never wear dresses and have short hair; girls do wear dresses and have long hair. Many children believe that they can change their gender by getting haircuts or changing their clothing, because they believe gender identity is concrete and attached to physical attributes. Some children become upset if their parents engage in gender-inappropriate conduct (Daddy carries Mommy's purse, Mommy changes the tire). It is not until age five or six that most children have the cognitive machinery to recognize gender as an attribute of the person and not the result of the material props that we use to display gender.

By this view, the acquisition of a gender identity is a switching point in the child's life. After age six, the child sees the world in *gender* terms. The child cannot go back, because the process of acquiring gender identity is irreversible after age three or four. All gender-role performances that are socially coded as appropriate for men or women become, thereafter, more easily acquired by the child who possesses the "correct" filter. Because so many aspects of behavior depend on gender identity, the acquisition of an irreversible filter is necessary to human development and is to be expected in all societies.

Social learning of gender does not end in childhood. Acquisition of gender identity may begin early, but it continues throughout the life cycle. Young children label themselves "boy" or "girl" at an early age, after which they actively begin to use the label to make sense of the world. However, this label, demonstrated by the capacity to express the sentence "I am a boy (girl)" in a number of ways and situations, does not exhaust the content of gender roles or pick out unerringly the appropriate gender-typed stimuli. A child does not know most of the things that an adult knows or believes or likes or feels. The two- or three-year-old girl does not know

that a woman is not likely to become president. She knows only that she uses the word "girl" to label herself and that she is comfortable with that label. Gender identity is more fluid than young children believe, and our gender socialization continues throughout our lives. And, equally important, we are active agents in our own socialization, not simply the passive receptors of cultural blueprints for appropriate gender behaviors.

Because there is no "natural" relationship between gender identity and gender-role performances, the young child who "knows" his or her gender possesses a label with very little content. However, the label is used to organize the new things that are experienced. This is done by observing who (in gender terms) leaves the house to go to work, who is in charge of the labor of the household, and who plays with cars or dolls (or at least who the child sees playing with these toys in the media). All of these activities are more or less gender-typed, mostly by who does them rather than by what is done. In addition, all children hear verbal exhortations of what boys do/don't do and what girls do/don't do. Children naturally tend to imitate models of behavior, even if that imitation is not reinforced, and this includes the vast amount of gender-typical behavior that is performed in front of them. Children swim in an ocean of gendered conduct, and it is terribly difficult to swim against the tide.<sup>13</sup>

From this point of view, the stability of the sense of a gendered self does not depend on biological differences at birth, the experiences of early childhood, or a cognitive filter. It depends on the way that a child's day-to-day situations continuously stabilize his or her sense of being a boy or a girl. Because men and women each have different social learning histories, we find gender differences in the behaviors and values of children and adults. To understand our own sexuality, we must first look at the kinds of arrangements we have made for the ways in which men and women are supposed to behave in our society and the ways they conceive of themselves. If you conceive of yourself as woman, and you are put into circumstances in which people in your society expect women to react in a certain way, the fact that you think of yourself as woman shapes the way you react to those circumstances. Thus in a society there are always two factors that affect gendered behavior: the demands of the social situation and one's prior experience of being a girl or a boy or a woman or a man.

#### **FEMINIST CHALLENGES TO PSYCHOANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

Freud's theory of psychosexual development offered a very different kind of challenge to assumptions of biological inevitability. Rather than focus on variation, as did anthropologists, Freud stressed the universality of sex differences but argued that such differences were produced—learned by children in interactions with their families and the larger society. He saw nothing inevitable about becoming either masculine or feminine, nor about becoming heterosexual. Sexual orientation and gender identity were achievements.

Many women have dismissed Freud's arguments because he argued that their development was the result of their coming to terms with the shame that would naturally follow from the realization that they did not have penises. Not only did his arguments place an absurd emphasis on a little flap of tissue, but also penis envy meant that women would always see themselves as inferior to men. What's more, Freud asserted



that female development required the repudiation of the clitoris, the source of sexual agency and pleasure, for the more “mature” sexuality of vaginal receptivity.

No sooner had Freud published his theories than women challenged the centrality of penis envy in girls’ development. Karen Horney’s 1922 essay, “On the Genesis of the Castration Complex in Women,” suggested that a theory that posited one-half of the human race to be unsatisfied was itself theoretically problematic. It was, rather, “the actual social subordination of women” that provided the context for women’s development. Since then, women have patiently explained that it was men, not women, who saw the possession of a penis as such a big deal. After all, without one, how could women know what it felt like? As one psychoanalyst put it:

It is the male who experiences the penis as a valuable organ and he assumes that women also must feel that way about it. But a woman cannot really imagine the sexual pleasure of a penis—she can only appreciate the social advantages its possessor has.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps women had a more political and social “privilege envy” than any envy to do with the body.

In fact, some argued, Freud had it backward. Women did not have penis envy as much as men had “womb envy.” Women, after all, can produce babies, apparently (at least in those cultures in which a rather uneventful moment nine months earlier is not remembered or not considered as significant) all by themselves! No matter what men do, they cannot create life. Bruno Bettelheim and several others suggested that the origins of women’s subordination stemmed from men’s fears of women’s reproductive powers, and these researchers pointed to male initiation rituals that imitated birth throes as an indication of ritual appropriation masking significant envy.<sup>15</sup>

Another line of critique has been to reverse Freud’s initial proposition. Instead of asking how and why women come to see themselves as inferior to men, why not ask how men come to see themselves as superior to women? Several feminist writers such as Nancy Chodorow, Lillian Rubin, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and Jessica Benjamin have posed that question.<sup>16</sup> Inspired by the object-relations school of psychoanalytic thought, these theorists pointed to the more deeply embedded masculine biases in Freud’s formulation. Freud argued that the final achievement of gender development was individual autonomy—freedom from dependency on the mother and thus freedom from the need for group identification. Autonomy was achieved in the boy’s renunciation of identification with his mother and subsequent identification with his father. However, in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow argued that Freud inadvertently revealed the sources of men’s sense of superiority and, thus, of male domination.<sup>17</sup>

What if, she argued, we were to suggest that the capacities for intimacy, connection, and community were healthy adult experiences. That would mean that the stage *before* the Oedipal crisis—when both boys and girls are deeply attached to their mother—was crucial. What happens is that boys lose that capacity for connection and intimacy in the break with the mother and the shift to the father, whereas girls retain that capacity. What’s more, such a shift is so traumatic for boys—and yet so necessary in our culture—that they must demonstrate constantly that they have successfully achieved it. Masculinity comes to be defined as the distance between the boy and his mother, between himself and being seen as a “mama’s boy” or a sissy. So he must spend

a significant amount of time and energy demonstrating his successful achievement of this distance, which he does by devaluing all things feminine—including girls, his mother, femininity, and, of course, all emotions associated with femininity. Male domination requires the masculine devaluation of the feminine. As Chodorow puts it:

A boy, in his attempt to gain an elusive masculine identification, often comes to define his masculinity in largely negative terms, as that which is not feminine or involved with women. There is an internal and external aspect to this. Internally, the boy tries to reject his mother and deny his attachment to her and the strong dependency on her that he still feels. He also tries to deny the deep personal identification with her that has developed during his early years. He does this by repressing whatever he takes to be feminine inside himself, and, importantly, by denigrating whatever he considers to be feminine in the outside world.

Thus Freud provided a decidedly “feminist” reading of male domination. He just didn’t know it, so fixated was he on the break with the mother as the crucial moment in *human* development.<sup>18</sup>

Kohlberg’s ideas about the stages of cognitive and moral development have also come under critical scrutiny from feminist scholars. Kohlberg’s stages proceeded from very concrete and practical rules to the application of universal ethical principles. But when girls and boys were evaluated, girls seemed “arrested” at the third stage of moral development, a stage that stresses mutual interpersonal expectations and relationships. (Kohlberg argued that this difference followed logically from the more remote and abstracted nature of the boy’s relationship with his father, compared with the girl’s more interdependent relationship with her mother.) Carol Gilligan, one of Kohlberg’s students, was not persuaded and believed the different types of moral reasoning ought not be hierarchically ranked. In her pathbreaking book, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan suggested that such stages appear only when men’s lives are regarded as the norm. In her interviews with Harvard women undergraduates, Gilligan found very different criteria for moral decision making. She heard another moral voice besides the “ethic of justice”—that abstract, universal, ethical paradigm Kohlberg proposed as the final stage of moral development. There is also an “ethic of care,” stressing intimacy and connectedness, that seems to be followed more often by women. From this, Gilligan suggested that the origins of aggression might be different for women and men. For men, the ethic of justice demands the blind and indifferent application of sanctions; aggression stems from constraints on individual autonomy. Women, Gilligan writes, hear a different voice, wherein “lies the truth of an ethic of care, and the tie between the relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the failure of connection.”<sup>19</sup>

Gilligan’s work unleashed a broad controversy among feminist psychologists that has continued to ripple through the larger culture. Gilligan’s work *seemed* to support arguments that women and men are fundamentally, irretrievably, and irreconcilably different. Other work building on that premise followed quickly, including works on cognition and epistemology and popular works that emphasized differences between women’s and men’s linguistic and mythical spheres.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, groups that sought to exclude women from various arenas attempted to use Gilligan’s arguments to legitimate discrimination. If women and men are so obviously different, their reasoning went, then excluding women from certain positions would not be discrimination, but rather

really a way to honor and respect differences. Historically, men who argued against woman suffrage made exactly the same case that Gilligan made. Here, for example, is an antisuffragist, writing in 1914:

One practical difficulty in the way of the participation of women in public affairs we might as well put bluntly. They do not seem to be intellectually fit for it . . . [I]t is very rare to find a woman who has a statesmanlike mind. The ordinary woman is interested in persons rather than in principles. Only when a principle is embodied in a person is she aroused to any enthusiasm. She sees the picturesque aspects of a cause, but does not readily follow an economic process . . . She is more likely to be interested in little things which touch her own life than in great things which determine the destinies of nations.

More recently, the Citadel and Virginia Military Institute cited the differences between women and men as justifications for excluding women from their state-supported corps of cadets (figure 4.1), and fire departments sought to exclude women from entering their ranks. (Given that the legal code requires the indifferent application of the law and adherence to abstract principles, one might have also predicted a move to exclude women from serving as judges.)<sup>21</sup>

Gilligan herself was more circumspect and deplored efforts to use her findings “to rationalize oppression.” What she found is that “educationally advantaged North American males have a strong tendency to focus on issues of justice when they describe



**Figure 4.1.** Upper class cadets “socialize” a young woman at Virginia Military Institute after the Supreme Court demanded that VMI admit women to its Corps of Cadets. Courtesy of Steve Helber/AP Images.

an experience of moral conflict and choice; two thirds of the men in our studies exhibited a 'justice focus.' One third of the women we studied also showed a justice focus. But one third of the women focused on care, in contrast to only one of the 46 men." Moreover, "one third of both females and males articulate justice and care concerns with roughly equal frequency." The psychological patterns Gilligan observed, she argued, are "not based on any premise of inherent differences between the sexes, but solely on the different nature of their experiences." To extrapolate from these data to claim that *men* and *women* differ on moral voices would be to distort her findings into stereotypes; she writes:

The title of my book was deliberate; it reads, "in a *different* voice," not "in a *woman's* voice." In my introduction, I explain that this voice is not identified by gender but by theme. Noting as an empirical observation the association of this voice with women, I caution the reader that "this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex." In tracing development, I "point to the interplay of these voices within each sex and suggest that their convergence marks times of crisis and change." No claims, I state, are made about the origins of these voices or their distribution in a wider population, across cultures or time (p. 2). Thus, the care perspective in my rendition is neither biologically determined nor unique to women. It is, however, a moral perspective different from that currently embedded in psychological theories and measures, and it is a perspective that was defined by listening to both women and men describe their own experience.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequent research has failed to replicate the binary gender differences in ethics; most researchers "report no average differences in the kind of reasoning men and women use in evaluating moral dilemmas, whether it is care-based or justice-based."<sup>23</sup>

Despite these disclaimers and the general lack of evidence of categorical gender differences, a generation of feminist essentialists has used Gilligan's work as a touchstone text. Observed differences between women and men are read backward into male and female biology in much the same way that biological essentialists were seen to have done. Perhaps the most celebrated of these efforts was by Deborah Tannen, who presented evidence that men and women use language differently. Men, she argues, use language to establish their position in a hierarchy. To men, conversations "are negotiations in which people try and achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from some others' attempts to put them down and push them around." Men interrupt more often, ignore comments from others, and make more declarations of facts and opinions. Women, by contrast, use conversation to establish and maintain relationships. To women, conversations are "negotiations for closeness in which people try and seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus." Women negotiate in private, ask more questions to maintain the flow of conversation, use more personal pronouns. Often when women speak, they end a declarative sentence with a slight rise in tone, as if ending it with a question mark.<sup>24</sup>

Like Gilligan, Tannen claims that she has simply identified two distinct patterns and that one is not “better” than the other. Unlike Gilligan, though, Tannen ascribes the difference between these patterns entirely to gender. Nor are her biases as concealed as she might have thought. For example, Tannen writes that men’s need for autonomy and independence can be a “hindrance” because “there are times when they do not have all the information needed to make a decision.” By contrast, women “make better managers because they are more inclined to consult others and involve employees in decision making.”<sup>25</sup>

But are such observed differences between women and men real? Here, the evidence is less conclusive. As we saw in chapter 1, studies of interruption suggest a far more complicated picture, that women interrupt women and men interrupt men at about the same rates, whereas men interrupt women far more than women interrupt men—a finding that led researchers to conclude that it’s not the gender of the speaker, but rather the gender of the person to whom one is speaking that makes the difference. This also seems to be the case with silence—that the same man, silent and uncommunicative at home, is quite talkative at work, where he uses conversation to make sure everyone feels all right. Again, it is not the gender of the silent one, but rather his or her relative power in the situation. Tannen’s argument that men and women use language differently is another version of Mars and Venus pop psychology—and just as riddled with misattributions. In the workplace, for example, employers and employees use language differently—regardless of whether they are women or men. Are bosses from Mars and secretaries from Venus? When we actually look at interactions, one’s social position is far more important than one’s gender.

Feminist psychologists did, however, expose an androcentric bias in the psychological literature of gender identity and development. With men as the normative standard against which both men and women were evaluated, women always seemed to be coming up short. As Gilligan demonstrated, when psychologists began to shift their framework and to listen closely to the voices of women, new patterns of development emerged. This bias also had consequences in the lives of real people. For example, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, is the diagnostic bible of mental illness professionals. For some time, the *DSM* has listed such mental illnesses as “premenstrual dysphoric disorder,” which is its version of PMS. So each woman potentially suffers from a specific mental illness for up to one week a month—which adds up to about 25 percent of her adult life. (Homosexuality was removed from the manual.) Psychologist Paula Caplan suggested that the *DSM* instead consider adding a new set of diagnoses, including “Delusional Dominating Personality Disorder” (DDPD) to classify sexist behavior as symptomatic of mental illness. And what about “John Wayne syndrome” or “macho personality disorder?” she asks. Her quiz to identify DDPD goes a long way toward exposing the gender biases in those ostensibly gender-neutral manuals (figure 4.2).

### DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES

So what are the real—and not the imagined or produced—psychological differences between women and men? Developmental psychologists have pointed to some significant differences between males and females that emerge as we grow.

# DO YOU RECOGNIZE THIS MAN?\*

A quiz you'll never see in *Cosmo* and *Redbook*

Men who meet at least six of the following criteria may have Delusional Dominating Personality Disorder! Warning: DDPD is pervasive, profound, and a maladaptive organization of the entire personality! (Check as many as apply.)

## 1. Is he . . .

- unable to establish and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships?
- unable to identify and express a range of feelings in himself (typically accompanied by an inability to identify accurately the feelings of other people)?
- unable to respond appropriately and empathically to the feelings and needs of close associates and intimates (often leading to the misinterpretation of signals from others)?
- unable to derive pleasure from doing things for others?

## 2. Does he . . .

- use power, silence, withdrawal, and/or avoidance rather than negotiation in the face of interpersonal conflict or difficulty?
- believe that women are responsible for the bad things that happen to him, while the good things are due to his own abilities, achievements, or efforts?
- inflate the importance and achievements of himself, males in general, or both?
- categorize spheres of functioning and sets of behavior rigidly according to sex (like believing housework is women's work)?
- use a gender-based double standard in interpreting or evaluating situations or behavior (considering a man who makes breakfast sometimes to be extraordinarily good, for example, but considering a woman who sometimes neglects to make breakfast deficient)?
- feel inordinately threatened by women who fail to disguise their intelligence?
- display any of the following delusions:
  - the delusion that men are entitled to the services of any woman with whom they are personally associated;
  - the delusion that women like to suffer and be ordered around;
  - the delusion that physical force is the best method of solving interpersonal problems;
  - the delusion that men's sexual and aggressive impulses are uncontrollable;
  - the delusion that pornography and erotica are identical;
  - the delusion that women control most of the world's wealth and/or power but do little of the world's work;
  - the delusion that existing inequalities in the distribution of power and wealth are a product of the survival of the fittest and that, therefore, allocation of greater social and economic rewards to the already privileged are merited.

## 3. Does he have . . .

- a pathological need to affirm his social importance by displaying himself in the company of females who meet any three of these criteria:
  - are conventionally physically attractive; or
  - are younger;
  - are shorter;
  - weigh less;
  - appear to be lower on socioeconomic criteria; or
  - are more submissive . . . than he is?
- a distorted approach to sexuality, displaying itself in one or both of these ways:
  - a pathological need for flattery about his sexual performance and/or the size of his genitalia;
  - an infantile tendency to equate large breasts on women with their sexual attractiveness.
- emotionally uncontrolled resistance to reform efforts that are oriented toward gender equity?

The tendency to consider himself a "New Man" neither proves nor disproves that the subject fits within this diagnostic category.

*\*Some women also fit many of these criteria, either because they wish to be as dominant as men or because they feel men should be dominant.*

Freely adapted, with permission, from *They Say You're Crazy*.

How the World's Most Powerful Psychiatrists Decide Who's Normal (Addison-Wesley, 1995) by Paula J. Caplan.

**Figure 4.2.** Hypothetical Diagnostic Tool for Delusional Dominating Personality Disorder (DDPD) by Paula J. Caplan. Used with permission.

Yet even these are differences between the means of two distributions, in which there is more variation *among* men and *among* women than there is *between* women and men. When psychologist Janet Hyde reviewed forty-six meta-analyses—studies that reviewed *all* the available studies on a certain topic—in a sort of “meta-meta-analysis,” she found that the size of the gender difference for 78 percent of all the traits, attitudes, and behaviors measured by these studies was “small or close to zero.”<sup>26</sup> And when psychologists Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin surveyed over 1,600 empirical studies from 1966 to 1973, they found only four areas with significant and consistent sex differences: (1) Girls have relatively higher verbal ability; (2) boys have better visual and spatial ability; (3) boys do better on mathematical tests; (4) boys were consistently more aggressive than girls. In fact, Maccoby and Jacklin conclude that their work:

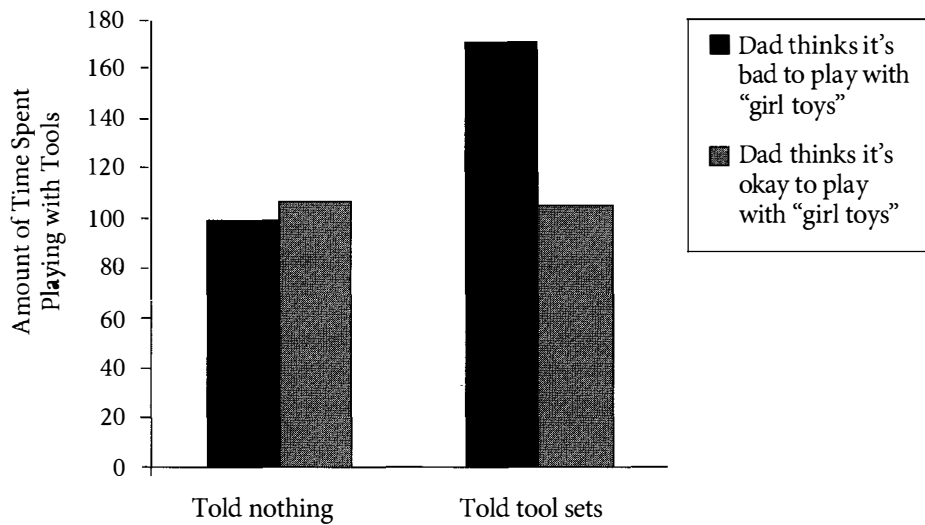
revealed a surprising degree of similarity in the rearing of boys and girls. The two sexes appear to be treated with equal affection, at least in the first five years of life (the period for which most information is available); they are equally allowed and encouraged to be independent, equally discouraged from dependent behavior;...there is even, surprisingly, no evidence of distinctive parental reaction to aggressive behavior in the two sexes. There ARE differences, however. Boys are handled and played with somewhat more roughly. They also receive more physical punishment. In several studies boys were found to receive both more praise and more criticism from their caretakers—socialization pressure, in other words, was somewhat more intense for boys—but the evidence on this point is inconsistent. The area of greatest differentiation is in very specifically sex-typed behavior. Parents show considerably more concern over a boy’s being a “sissy” than over a girl’s being a tomboy. This is especially true of fathers, who seem to take the lead in actively discouraging any interest a son might have in feminine toys, activities, or attire.<sup>27</sup>

Relying on parents for signals about what is appropriate turns out to be more decisive than the sex of the children. In one experiment, half of the sixty preschool children were told that a tool set was for boys and a kitchen set was for girls. The children were also asked what they thought their mothers and fathers would say if they played with the toys: Would their parents say it was good, bad, or that it didn’t matter?

How much time did they play with each of the toys (figure 4.3)? The results of the experiment were interesting. For the boys, it depended less on the type of toy, and more on what they were told about it—and what they thought their fathers would think. When boys were told nothing about the toys, they spent the same amount of time playing with both the tools and the kitchen set. When the tools were labeled “for boys,” those who thought their fathers would consider cross-gender play as “bad” spent a lot more time playing with the tools. And when the kitchen set was labeled “for girls,” not one boy who thought his father would say that such play was “bad” even touched it.

Now, remember: when the toys were not labeled, the boys spent as much time with the tools as they did with the kitchen set. Clearly there was nothing intrinsic about tools or kitchen sets that were more or less attractive to the boys. What mattered is how they

### Boys Playing with the Tool Set



### Boys Playing with the Kitchen Set



**Figure 4.3.** “Boys Playing with the Tool Set”, and “Boys Playing with the Kitchen Set” graphs.

were labeled—and what they thought their fathers would say. (It’s equally interesting that the kids didn’t think the fathers would care which toys their daughters played with, or that their mothers would care what *either* the boys or the girls played with. Only the sons, and only the fathers.)<sup>28</sup>

Males and females can be trained for a vast array of characteristics, and individual variations along this array overlap extensively. Because only small actual differences



## Oh Really?

Boys like to play with guns, and girls like to play house.

Actually, it depends. Boys and girls, aged 3 to 7, were presented with three possible toys to play with: a gun and holster (traditionally male), a tea set (traditionally female), and a ball (neutral). After establishing that certain characteristics were gender-coded—hard, sharp, angular (masculine), soft and smooth (feminine)—the researchers altered the toys. The gun was adorned with rhinestones in a purple holster. The camouflage-colored tea set was covered with sharp spikes.

And both the boys and girls were certain that the tea set was for boys and the gun and holster were for girls.

Source: Rosalind Chait Barnett, "Understanding the Role of Pervasive Negative Gender Stereotypes: What Can Be Done?" paper presented at The Way Forward, Heidelberg, Germany, May 2007.

are found between girls and boys, how do we account for the relative ineffectiveness of socialization activities (toys, play, television, schools) in shaping the behavior of children in psychological experiments, and yet the continuing assignment to children and adults of roles on the basis of gender typing? Our answer can be only speculative. It appears that most psychological experiments offer boys and girls an opportunity to perform similar tasks without labeling the tasks as gender-appropriate. In these contexts, males and females perform mostly alike. It would appear that the real power of gender typing resides less in the child than in the environments in which the child finds itself. The social environment is filled with gendered messages and gendered activities. Even if the child possesses no fixed and permanent gender role, social arrangements will continually reinforce gender differences. In a gender-neutral experiment, social requirements are removed, and so the child does not behave in accord with a gender stereotype. Perhaps it is not internalized beliefs that keep us in place, as men or women, but rather our interpersonal and social environments. Because there is considerable variation in what men and women actually do, it may require the weight of social organization and constant reinforcement to maintain gender-role differences.

### THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SEX ROLES

In their effort to understand the constellation of attitudes, traits, and behaviors that constitutes appropriate gender identity, some social psychologists elaborated and extended original classifications of the M-F scale offered by Terman and Miles. If masculinity and femininity could be understood as points on a continuum, a variety of abnormal behaviors could possibly be understood as examples of gender-inappropriate behavior.<sup>29</sup> In the years after World War II, for example, some psychologists hypothesized that the propensity toward fascism and Nazism stemmed from distorted assertions of gender identity. The authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* posited a typology of behaviors, based on the M-F scale, a scale that suggested that femininity and masculinity can describe both an internal psychological identification and an external behavioral manifestation. Their typology thus created four possible combinations instead of two:

		Internal Psychological Organization	
		Masculine	Feminine
External	Masculine	MM	MF
Behavioral Manifestation	Feminine	FM	FF

Two of the cells, upper left and lower right, would be considered “gender appropriate”—males and females whose internal psychological identification matches their external behaviors. Those males whose scores placed them in the upper right cell—internally feminine, externally masculine—also scored highest on measures of racism, authoritarianism, and hypermasculinity. The authors proposed that such attitudes were the means for those who were insecure about their masculinity to cover up their insecurities—by more rigid adherence to the most traditional norms.<sup>30</sup>

This notion became common wisdom in 1950s America and was used to study juvenile delinquency, southern resistance to integration and civil rights, and male resistance to feminism. A more recent study has included homophobia. It resonated in popular advice about schoolyard bullies—that they are the *least* secure about their masculinity, which is why they have to try to prove it all the time. One’s response to a bully—“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”—will always fall on deaf ears, because the goal is not to compete but to win, so that insecure masculinity can be (however momentarily) reassured. It doesn’t work, of course, because the opponent is no real match, and so the bully has to do it all over again. Interestingly, Sanford and his colleagues found that the men who scored in the lower left cell—externally feminine and internally masculine—were the most creative, artistic, and intelligent. It took a very secure man, indeed, to stray from the behavioral norms of masculinity, they suggested.

A recent effort to revisit this thesis found that men who felt that their masculinity was more “threatened” would overcompensate; they showed higher rates of support for the Iraq War, more negative attitudes toward homosexuals, and a greater interest in purchasing a sport utility vehicle. That old adage that the bigger the car, the smaller the . . . well, you know, may turn out to have some empirical validity.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas Sanford and his colleagues had developed a typology of inner identities and external behaviors, Miller and Swanson saw a developmental sequence. All children, both males and females, begin their lives as “FF”—totally identified with and behaving like the mother. Boys then pass through the Oedipal stage, or “FM,” during which they continue to identify with the mother but begin to make a break from that identification, while they simultaneously acquire superficial masculine traits and behaviors. Finally, males arrive at “MM,” both internal identification and external behaviors that are gender-appropriate. Thus authoritarianism, racism, sexism, and homophobia might now be seen as examples of psychological immaturity, a kind of arrested development. (The potential fourth stage, “MF,” was dropped from the study.)<sup>32</sup>

A second trajectory that coincided with these studies was the work of Talcott Parsons and other sociologists who sought to establish the societal necessity for masculinity and femininity. Parsons argued that society had two types of major functions—production

and reproduction—and that these required two separate institutional systems—the occupational system and the kinship system—which, in turn, required two types of roles that needed to be filled in order for it to function successfully. Instrumental roles demanded rationality, autonomy, and competitiveness; expressive roles demanded tenderness and nurturing so that the next generation could be socialized. In this way, Parsons shifted the emphasis of sex-role identity development away from the “need” of the infant to become either masculine or feminine to the need of society for individuals to fill specific slots. Fortunately, Parsons argued, we had two different types of people who were socialized to assume these two different roles.

Parsons suggested, however, that the allocation of roles to males and females did not always work smoothly. For example, in Western societies, the isolation of the nuclear family and the extended period of childhood meant that boys remained identified with the mother for a very long time. What’s more, the separation of spheres meant that girls had their appropriate role model immediately before them, whereas boys did not have adequate role models. Thus, he argued, boys’ break with the mother and their need to establish their individuality and masculinity often were accompanied by violent protest against femininity, and angry repudiation of the feminine became a way for the boy to purge himself of feminine identification. He “revolts against identification with his mother in the name of masculinity,” Parsons writes, equating goodness with femininity, so that becoming a “bad boy” becomes a positive goal. This, Parsons suggests, has some negative consequences, including a “cult of compulsive masculinity”:

Western men are peculiarly susceptible to the appeal of an adolescent type of assertively masculine behavior and attitudes which may take various forms. They have in common a tendency to revolt against the routine aspects of the primarily institutionalized masculine role of sober responsibility, meticulous respect for the rights of others, and tender affection towards women. Assertion through physical prowess, with an endemic tendency toward violence and hence the military ideal, is inherent in the complex and the most dangerous potentiality.<sup>33</sup>

For the girl, the process is somewhat different. She has an easier time because she remains identified with the mother. Her rebellion and anger come from recognizing “masculine superiority”—“the fact that her own security like that of other women is dependent on the favor—even ‘whim’—of a man.” Suddenly she realizes that the qualities that she values are qualities that may handicap her. She may express the aggression that would invariably follow upon such frustration by rebelling against the feminine role altogether: She may become a feminist.

By the 1970s, sex-role theory was, itself, facing significant critical scrutiny. Some thinkers found the binary model between roles, system needs, and males and females just a bit too facile and convenient, as well as politically conservative—as if changing roles meant disrupting the needs that *society* had. Others stressed the coercive nature of these roles: If they were natural and met readily evident needs, why did so many people rebel against them, and why did they need to be so rigorously enforced?

Two significant challenges came from social psychologists themselves. Sandra Bem and others explored the *content* of sex roles. The Bem Sex Role Inventory tested respondents on their perception of sixty different attributes, twenty of which were coded as “feminine,” twenty as “masculine,” and twenty more were “fillers.” Although

**Items on the Masculinity, Femininity, and Social Desirability Scales of the BSRI**

<b>Masculine items</b>	<b>Feminine items</b>	<b>Neutral items</b>
49. Acts as a leader	11. Affectionate	51. Adaptable
46. Aggressive	5. Cheerful	36. Conceited
58. Ambitious	50. Childlike	9. Conscientious
22. Analytical	32. Compassionate	60. Conventional
13. Assertive	53. Does not use harsh language	45. Friendly
10. Athletic	35. Eager to soothe hurt feelings	15. Happy
55. Competitive	20. Feminine	3. Helpful
4. Defends own beliefs	14. Flatterable	48. Inefficient
37. Dominant	59. Gentle	24. Jealous
19. Forceful	47. Gullible	39. Likable
25. Has leadership abilities	56. Loves children	6. Moody
7. Independent	17. Loyal	21. Reliable
52. Individualistic	26. Sensitive to the needs of others	30. Secretive
31. Makes decisions easily	8. Shy	33. Sincere
40. Masculine	38. Soft spoken	42. Solemn
1. Self-reliant	23. Sympathetic	57. Tactful
34. Self-sufficient	44. Tender	12. Theatrical
16. Strong personality	29. Understanding	27. Truthful
43. Willing to take a stand	41. Warm	18. Unpredictable
28. Willing to take risks	2. Yielding	54. Unsystematic

Note: The number preceding each item reflects the position of each adjective as it actually appears on the Inventory.

this replaced a continuum with categorical sex roles, Bem discovered that the most psychologically well-adjusted and intelligent people were those who fell in between the polar oppositions of masculinity and femininity. It was, she argued, *androgyny*, “the combined presence of socially valued, stereotypic, feminine and masculine characteristics,” that best described the healthily adjusted individual. What’s more, Bem argued, is that given where most of us actually fall on the continuum, masculinity and femininity are hardly opposites.

Several empirical studies seemed to bear out the desirability of an androgynous personality constellation over a stereotypically feminine or masculine one. But subsequent studies failed to confirm the validity of these measures, and androgyny was discredited as a kind of wishy-washy nonpersonality, rather than the synthesis of the best of both worlds.<sup>34</sup> What’s more, conceptually, dividing male and female traits into two categories makes it impossible to integrate power and gender inequality in the discussion; twenty years after her initial studies, Bem notes that the scale “reproduces . . . the very gender polarization that it seeks to undercut.”<sup>35</sup>

Whereas proponents of androgyny challenged the content of sex role theory, Joseph Pleck challenged the form. In a series of articles that culminated in his book, *The Myth*

of *Masculinity*, Pleck advanced the idea that the problem was not that men were having a hard time fitting into a rational notion of masculinity but rather that the role itself was internally contradictory and inconsistent. Instead of simply accepting the sex role as a package, Pleck operationalized what he called the “Male Sex Role Identity” model into a discrete set of testable propositions. These included:

1. Sex-role identity is operationally defined by measures of psychological sex typing, conceptualized in terms of psychological masculinity and/or femininity dimensions.
2. Sex-role identity derives from identification-modeling and, to a lesser extent, reinforcement and cognitive learning of sex-typed traits, especially among males.
3. The development of appropriate sex-role identity is a risky, failure-prone process, especially for males.
4. Homosexuality reflects a disturbance of sex-role identity.
5. Appropriate sex-role identity is necessary for good psychological adjustment because of an inner psychological need for it.
6. Hypermasculinity indicates insecurity in sex-role identities.
7. Problems of sex-role identity account for men’s negative attitudes and behavior toward women.
8. Problems of sex-role identity account for boys’ difficulties in school performance and adjustment.
9. Black males are particularly vulnerable to sex-role identity problems.
10. Male adolescent initiation rites are a response to problems of sex-role identity.
11. Historical changes in the character of work and the organization of the family have made it more difficult for men to develop and maintain their sex-role identities.

When virtually all of these propositions turned out to be empirically false, Pleck argued that the male sex role itself was the source of strain, anxiety, and male problems. Psychology was thus transformed from the vehicle that would help problematic men adapt to their rational sex role into one of the origins of their problems, the vehicle by which men had been fed a pack of lies about masculinity. The sex-role system itself was the source of much of men’s anxieties and pain. In its place, Pleck proposed the Male Sex Role Strain model:

1. Sex roles are operationally defined by sex-role stereotypes and norms.
2. Sex roles are contradictory and inconsistent.
3. The proportion of individuals who violate sex roles is high.
4. Violating sex roles leads to social condemnation.
5. Violating sex roles leads to negative psychological consequences.
6. Actual or imagined violation of sex roles leads individuals to overconform to them.
7. Violating sex roles has more severe consequences for males than females.
8. Certain characteristics prescribed by sex roles are psychologically dysfunctional.
9. Each gender experiences sex-role strain in its work and family roles.
10. Historical changes cause sex-role strain.

The net effect of this new model is to shift the understanding of problems from the men themselves to the roles that they are forced to play.<sup>36</sup> Subsequent research has explored the grappling with these contradictory role specifications by different groups of men and the problematic behaviors (such as sexual risk taking) that are expressions of men's efforts to reconcile contradictory role demands.<sup>37</sup>

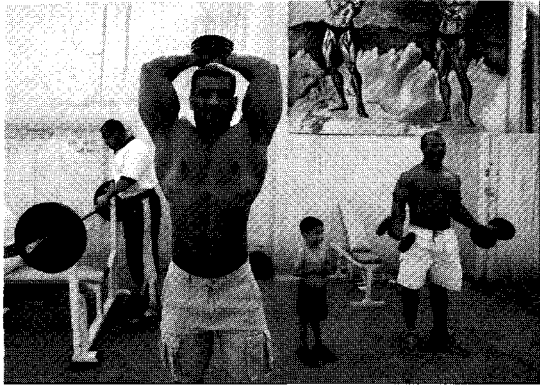
But there remain problems with sex-role theory that even these two ambitious efforts could not resolve. For one thing, when psychologists discussed the "male" sex role or the "female" sex role, they posited a single, monolithic entity, a "role," into which all boys and all girls were placed. Through a process of socialization, boys acquired the male sex role, girls, the female one. Imagine two large tanks, into which all biological males and females are placed. But all males and all females are not alike. There are a variety of different "masculinities" or "femininities" depending on class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and region. If all boys or all girls were to receive the same socialization to the same sex role, differences in the construction of black masculinity, or Latina femininity, or middle-aged gay masculinity, or midwestern older white femininity, etc., would all be effaced. Sex-role theory is unable to account for the differences *among* men or *among* women because it always begins from the normative prescriptions of sex *roles*, rather than the experiences of men and women themselves. (Remember that the differences among men and among women—not the differences between women and men—provide most of the variations in attitudes, traits, and behavior we observe.)

A second problem with sex-role theory is that the separate tanks into which males and females are sorted look similar to each other. When we say that boys become masculine and girls become feminine in roughly similar ways, we posit a false equivalence between the two. If we ignore the power differential between the two tanks, then both privilege and oppression disappear. "Men don't have power," writes pop therapist Warren Farrell, "men and women have roles."<sup>38</sup> Despite what men and women may *feel* about their situation, men as a group have power in our society over women as a group. In addition, some men—privileged by virtue of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.—have power over other men. Any adequate explanation of gender must account not only for gender difference but also for male domination. Theories of sex roles are inadequate to this task.<sup>39</sup>

This theoretical inadequacy stems from the sorting process in the first place. Sex-role theorists see boys and girls sorted into those two separate categories. But what we know about being a man has everything to do with what it means to be a woman; and what we know about being a woman has everything to do with what it means to be a man. Constructions of gender are *relational*—we understand what it means to be a man or a woman in relation to the dominant models as well as to one another. And those who are marginalized by race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and the like also measure their gender identities against those of the dominant group.

Finally, sex-role theory assumes that only individuals are gendered, that gendered individuals occupy gender-neutral positions and inhabit gender-neutral institutions. But gender is more than an attribute of individuals; gender organizes and constitutes the field in which those individuals move. The institutions of our lives—families, workplaces, schools—are themselves gendered institutions, organized to reproduce the differences and the inequalities between women and men. If one wants to understand the

lives of people in any situation, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote, one “must inquire first into the situation surrounding [them].”<sup>40</sup> Theorists of sex roles and androgyny help us move beyond strictly psychological analyses of gender. But the inability to theorize difference, power, relationality, and the institutional dimension of gender means that we will need to build other elements into the discussion. Sociological explanations of gender begin from these principles.



5

## The Social Construction of Gender Relations

Society is a masked ball, where every one hides his real character, and reveals it by hiding.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON  
“Worship” (1860)

In one of its most thoughtful definitions, C. Wright Mills defined sociology as the intersection of biography and history. In his view, the goal of a sociological perspective would be to locate an individual in both time and space, to provide the social and historical contexts in which a person constructs his or her identity. In that sense, sociology’s bedrock assumption, upon which its analyses of structures and institutions rest, is that individuals shape their lives within both historical and social contexts. We do not do so simply because we are biologically programmed to act in certain ways, nor because we have inevitable human tasks to solve as we age. Rather, we respond to the world we encounter, shaping, modifying, and creating our identities through those encounters with other people and within social institutions.

Thus sociology takes as its starting points many of the themes raised in earlier chapters. Sociological perspectives on gender assume the variability of gendered identities that anthropological research has explored, the biological “imperatives” toward gender identity and differentiation (though sociology locates the source of these imperatives less in our bodies and more in our environments), and the psychological imperatives toward both autonomy and connection that modern society requires of



individuals in the modern world. To a sociologist, both our biographies (identities) and histories (evolving social structures) are gendered.

Like other social sciences, sociology begins with a critique of biological determinism. Instead of observing our experiences as the expressions of inborn, interplanetary differences, the social sciences examine the variations among men and among women, as well as the differences between them. The social sciences thus begin with the explicitly social origin of our patterns of development.

Our lives depend on social interaction. Literally, it seems. In the thirteenth century, Frederick II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, decided to perform an experiment to see if he could discover the “natural language of man.” What language would we speak if no one taught us language? He selected some newborn babies and decreed that no one speak to them. The babies were suckled and nursed and bathed as usual, but speech and songs and lullabies were strictly prohibited. All the babies died. And you’ve probably heard those stories of “feral children”—babies who were abandoned and raised by animals became suspicious of people and could not be socialized to live in society after age six or so. In all the stories, the children died young, as did virtually all the “isolates,” those little children who were locked away in closets and basements by sadistic or insane parents.<sup>1</sup>

What do such stories tell us? True or apocryphal, they suggest that biology alone—that is, our anatomical composition—doesn’t determine our development as we might have thought. We need to interact, to be socialized, to be part of society. It is that interaction, not our bodies, that makes us who we are.

Often, the first time we hear that gender is socially constructed, we take it to mean that we are, as individuals, not responsible for what we do. “ ‘Society’ made me like this,”

## Isolated Children

Some children have been isolated from almost all human contact by abusive caregivers. One of the best-documented cases of an isolated child was “Isabelle,” who was born to an unmarried, deaf-mute teenager. The girl’s parents were so afraid of scandal that they kept both mother and daughter locked away in a darkened room, where they had no contact with the outside world. In 1938, when she was six years old, Isabelle escaped from her confinement. She was unable to speak except to make croaking sounds, she was extremely fearful of strangers, and she reacted to stimuli with the instinct of a wild animal. Gradually she became used to being around people, but she expressed no curiosity about them; it was as if she did not see herself as one of them. But doctors and social scientists began a long period of systematic training. Within a year she was able

to speak in complete sentences, and soon she was able to attend school with other children. By the age of fourteen, she was in the sixth grade, happy and well-adjusted. She managed to overcome her lack of early childhood socialization, but only through exceptional effort.

Studies of other isolated children reveal that some can recover, with effort and specialized care, but that others suffer permanent damage. It is unclear exactly why, but no doubt some contributing factors are the duration of the isolation, the child’s age when the isolation began, the presence of some human contacts (like Isabelle’s mother), other abuse accompanying the isolation, and the child’s intelligence. The 1994 film *Nell* starred Jodie Foster as a near-isolate who gradually learns language and social interaction well enough to fall in love with her doctor (played by Liam Neeson).

we might say. “It’s not my fault.” (This is often the flip side of the other response one often hears: “In American an individual can do anything he or she wants to do,” or “It’s a free country, and everyone is entitled to their [*sic*] own opinion.”) Both of these rhetorical strategies—what I call “reflexive passivity” and “impulsive hyperindividualism”—are devices that we use to deflect individual accountability and responsibility. They are both, therefore, misreadings of the sociological mandate. When we say that gender identity is socially constructed, what we do mean is that our identities are a fluid assemblage of the meanings and behaviors that we construct from the values, images, and prescriptions we find in the world around us. Our gendered identities are both voluntary—we choose to become who we are—and coerced—we are pressured, forced, sanctioned, and often physically beaten into submission to some rules. We neither make up the rules as we go along, nor do we fit casually and without struggle into pre-assigned roles.

For some of us, becoming adult men and women in our society is a smooth and almost effortless drifting into behaviors and attitudes that feel as familiar to us as our skin. And for others of us, becoming masculine or feminine is an interminable torture, a nightmare in which we must brutally suppress some parts of ourselves to please others—or, simply, to survive. For most of us, though, the experience falls somewhere in between: There are parts we love and wouldn’t part with, and other parts where we feel we’ve been forced to exaggerate one side at the expense of others. It’s the task of the sociological perspective to specify the ways in which our own experiences, our interactions with others, and the institutions combine to shape our sense of who we are. Biology provides the raw materials, whereas society and history provide the context, the instruction manual, that we follow to construct our identities.

### **A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE**

In the first chapter, I identified the four elements of a social constructionist perspective on gender. Definitions of masculinity and femininity vary, first, from culture to culture, and, second, in any one culture over historical time. Thus social constructionists rely on the work of anthropologists and historians to identify the commonalities and the differences in the meanings of masculinity and femininity from one culture to another and to describe how those differences change over time.

Gender definitions also vary over the course of a person’s life. The issues confronting women when they are younger—their marketability in both the workplace and the marriage market, for example—will often be very different from the issues they face at menopause or retirement. And the issues confronting a young man about proving himself and achieving what he calls success and the social institutions in which he will attempt to enact those experiences will change throughout his life. For example, men often report a “softening,” the development of greater interest in care giving and nurturing, when they become grandfathers than when they became fathers—often to the puzzlement and distress of their sons. But in their sixties and seventies, when their children are having children, these men do not feel the same pressures to perform, to leave a mark, to prove themselves. Their battles are over, and they can relax and enjoy the fruits of their efforts. Thus we rely on developmental psychologists to specify the normative “tasks” that any individual must successfully accomplish as he or she matures

and develops, and we also need scholars in the humanities to explore the symbolic record that such men and women leave us as evidence of their experiences.

Finally, definitions of masculinity and femininity will vary within any one culture at any one time—by race, class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, education, region of the country, etc. You'll recall that it seems obvious that an older, gay, black man in Chicago will have a different idea of what it means to be a man than will a heterosexual white teenager in rural Iowa.

Social constructionism thus builds on the other social and behavioral sciences, adding specific dimensions to the exploration of gender. What sociology contributes are the elements that the social psychology of sex roles cannot explain adequately: difference, power, and the institutional dimensions of gender. To explain difference, social constructionism offers an analysis of the plurality of gender definitions; to explain power, it emphasizes the ways in which some definitions become normative through the struggles of different groups for power—including the power to define. Finally, to explain the institutional dimension, social constructionism moves beyond socialization of gendered individuals who occupy gender-neutral sites to the study of the interplay between gendered individuals and gendered institutions.

### BEYOND SEX-ROLE THEORY

As we saw in the last chapter, social psychologists located the process of acquisition of gender identity in the developmental patterns of individuals in their families and in early childhood interaction. Specifically, sex-role theorists explored the ways in which individuals come to be gendered and the ways in which they negotiate their ways toward some sense of internal consistency and coherence, despite contradictory role definitions. Still, however, the emphasis is on the gendering of individuals, and occasionally on the inconsistent cultural blueprints with which those individuals must contend. Sociological understandings of gender begin, historically, with a critique of sex-role theory, with sociologists arguing that such theory is inadequate to fully understand the complexities of gender as a social institution. Sociologists have identified four significant problems with sex-role theory—problems that require its modification.

First, the use of the idea of role has the curious effect of actually minimizing the importance of gender. Role theory uses drama as a metaphor—we learn our roles through socialization and then perform them for others. But to speak of a gender role makes it sound almost too theatrical and thus too easily changeable. Gender, as Helena Lopata and Barrie Thorne write, “is not a role in the same sense that being a teacher, sister, or friend is a role. Gender, like race or age, is deeper, less changeable, and infuses the more specific roles one plays; thus, a female teacher differs from a male teacher in important sociological respects (e.g., she is likely to receive less pay, status and credibility).” *To make gender a role like any other role is to diminish its power in structuring our lives.*<sup>2</sup>

Second, sex-role theory posits singular normative definitions of masculinity and femininity. If the meanings of masculinity and femininity vary across cultures, over historical time, among men within any one culture, and over the life course, we cannot speak of masculinity or femininity as though each were a constant, singular, universal essence. Personally, when I read what social psychologists wrote about the “male sex

role” I always wondered whom they were writing about. “Who, me?” I thought. Is there really only *one* male sex role and only one female sex role?

One key theme about gender identity is the ways in which other differences—race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, region—all inform, shape, and modify our definitions of gender. To speak of one male or one female sex role is to compress the enormous variety of our culture’s ideals into one and to risk ignoring the other factors that shape our identities. In fact, in those early studies of sex roles, social psychologists did just that, suggesting that, for example, black men or women or gay men or lesbians evidenced either “too much” or “too little” adherence to their appropriate sex role. In that way, homosexuals or people of color were seen as expressing sex-role problems; because their sex roles differed from the normative, it was they who had the problem. (As we saw earlier, the most sophisticated sex-role theorists understand that such normative definitions are internally contradictory, but they still mistake the normative for the “normal.”)

By positing this false universalism, sex-role theory assumes what needs to be explained—how the normative definition is established and reproduced—and explains away all the differences among men and among women. Sex-role theory cannot fully accommodate these differences among men or among women. A more satisfying investigation must take into account these different definitions of masculinity and femininity constructed and expressed by different groups of men and women. Thus we speak of *masculinities* and *femininities*. What’s more, sociologists see the differences among masculinities or femininities as expressing exactly the opposite relationship than do sex-role theorists. Sex-role theorists, if they can accommodate differences at all, see these differences as aberrations, as the failure to conform to the normal sex role. Sociologists, on the other hand, believe that the differences among definitions of masculinity or femininity are themselves the outcome of the ways in which those groups interact with their environments. Thus sociologists contend that one cannot understand the differences in masculinity or femininity based on race or ethnicity without first looking at the ways in which institutional and interpersonal racial inequality structures the ways in which members of those groups actively construct their identities. Sex-role theorists might say, for example, that black men, lesbians, or older Latinas experience discrimination because their definitions of masculinity and femininity are “different” from the norm. To a sociologist, that’s only half right. A sociologist would add that these groups develop different definitions of masculinity and femininity in active engagement with a social environment in which they are discriminated against. Thus their differences are more the product of discrimination than its cause.

This leads to a third arena in which sociologists challenge sex-role theory. Gender is not only plural, it is also relational. A related problem with sex-role theory is that it posits two separate spheres, as if sex-role differentiation were more a matter of sorting a herd of cattle into two appropriate pens for branding. Boys get herded into the masculine corral, girls the feminine. But such a static model also suggests that the two corrals have virtually nothing to do with one another. “The result of using the role framework is an abstract view of the *differences* between the sexes and their situations, not a concrete one of the *relations* between them.”<sup>3</sup> But what surveys indicate is that men construct their ideas of what it means to be men *in constant reference* to definitions of femininity. What it means to be a man is to be unlike a woman; indeed, social psychologists have

emphasized that although different groups of men may disagree about other traits and their significance in gender definitions, the “antifemininity” component of masculinity is perhaps the dominant and universal characteristic.

Fourth, because gender is plural and relational, it is also situational. What it means to be a man or a woman varies in different contexts. Those different institutional contexts demand and produce different forms of masculinity and femininity. “Boys may be boys,” cleverly comments feminist legal theorist Deborah Rhode, “but they express that identity differently in fraternity parties than in job interviews with a female manager.”<sup>4</sup> Gender is thus not a property of individuals, some “thing” one has, but rather a specific set of behaviors that is produced in specific social situations. And thus gender changes as the situation changes.

Sex-role theory cannot adequately account for either the differences among women and men or their different definitions of masculinity and femininity in different situations without implicitly assuming some theory of deviance. Nor can it express the relational character of those definitions. In addition, sex-role theory cannot fully account for the power relationships between women and men and among different groups of women and different groups of men. Thus the fourth and perhaps most significant problem in sex-role theory is that it *depoliticizes* gender, making gender a set of individual attributes and not an aspect of social structure. “The notion of ‘role’ focuses attention more on individuals than on social structure, and implies that ‘the female role’ and ‘the male role’ are complementary (i.e., separate or different but equal),” write sociologists Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne. “The terms are depoliticizing; they strip experience from its historical and political context and neglect questions of power and conflict.”<sup>5</sup>

But how can one speak of gender without speaking of power? As I pointed out in the book’s introduction, a pluralistic and relational theory of gender cannot pretend that all masculinities and femininities are created equal. All American women and all American men must also contend with a singular vision of both masculinity and femininity, specific definitions that are held up as models against which we all measure ourselves. These are what sociologist R. W. Connell calls the “hegemonic” definition of masculinity and the “emphasized” version of femininity. These are normative constructions, the ones against which others are measured and, almost invariably, found wanting. (Connell’s trenchant critique of sex-role theory, therefore, hinges on her contention that sex-role psychologists do not challenge but in fact reproduce the hegemonic version as the “normal” one.) The hegemonic definition is a “particular variety of masculinity to which others—among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men—are subordinated.”<sup>6</sup> We thus come to know what it means to be a man or a woman in American culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others”—racial minorities, sexual minorities, etc. One of the most fruitful areas of research in sociology today is trying to specify exactly how these hegemonic versions are established and how different groups negotiate their ways through problematized definitions.

Sex role theory proved inadequate to explore the variations in gender definitions, which require adequately theorizing of the variations *within* the category men or women. Such theorizing makes it possible to see the relationships between and among men or between and among women as structured relationships as well. Tension about

gender was earlier theorized by sex-role theory as a tension between an individual and the expectations that were established by the sex role—that is, between the individual and an abstract set of expectations.

This leads to the fifth and final problem with sex-role theory—its inadequacy in comprehending the dynamics of change. Movements for social change, like feminism or gay liberation, become movements to expand role definitions and to change role expectations. Their goal is to expand role options for individual women and men, whose lives are constrained by stereotypes. But social and political movements are not about only expanding the opportunities for individuals to break free of the constraints of inhibiting sex roles, to allow their “true” selves to emerge: They are also about the redistribution of power in society. They demand the reallocation of resources and an end to forms of inequality that are embedded in social institutions as well as sex-role stereotypes. Only a perspective that begins with an analysis of power can adequately understand those social movements. A social constructionist approach seeks to be more concrete, specifying tension and conflict not between individuals and expectations, but rather between and among groups of people within social institutions. Thus social constructionism is inevitably about power.

What’s wrong with sex-role theory can, finally, be understood by analogy. Why is it, do you suppose, no reputable scholars today use the terms “race roles” or “class roles” to describe the observable aggregate differences between members of different races or different classes? Are such “race roles” specific behavioral and attitudinal characteristics that are socialized into all members of different races? Hardly. Not only would such a term flatten all the distinctions and differences among members of the same race, but also it would ignore the ways in which the behaviors of different races—to the extent that they might be seen as different in the first place—are the products of racial inequality and oppression and not the external expression of some inner essence.

The positions of women and blacks have much in common, as sociologist Helen Hacker pointed out in her groundbreaking article “Women as a Minority Group,” which was written more than a half century ago. Hacker argued that systematic structural inequality produces a “culture of self-hatred” among the target group. And yet we do not speak of “race roles.” Such an idea would be absurd, because (1) the differences within each race are far greater than the differences between races; (2) what it means to be white or black is always constructed in relationship to the other; (3) those definitions make no sense outside the context of the racially based power that white people, as a group, maintain over people of color, as a group. Movements for racial equality are about more than expanding role options for people of color.

Ultimately, to use role theory to explain race or gender is to blame the victim. If our gendered behaviors “stem from fundamental personality differences, socialized early in life,” suggests psychologist David Tresemer, then responsibility must lie at our own feet. This is what R. Stephen Warner and his colleagues call the “Sambo theory of oppression”—“the victims internalize the maladaptive set of values of the oppressive system. Thus behavior that appears incompetent, deferential, and self-degrading is assumed to reflect the crippled capabilities of the personality.”<sup>7</sup> In this worldview, social change must be left to the future, when a more egalitarian form of childhood socialization can produce children better able to function according to hegemonic

standards. Social change comes about when the oppressed learn better the ways of their oppressors. If they refuse, and no progress is made—well, whose fault is that?

#### A NOTE ABOUT POWER

One of the central themes of this book is that gender is about difference and also about inequality, about power. At the level of gender relations, gender is about the power that men as a group have over women as a group, and it is also about the power that some men have over other men (or that some women have over other women). It is impossible to explain gender without adequately understanding power—not because power is the consequence of gender difference, but rather because power is what produces those gender differences in the first place.

To say that gender is a power relation—the power of men over women and the power of some men or women over other men or women—is among the more controversial arguments of the social constructionist perspective. In fact, the question of power is among the most controversial elements in all explanations of gender. Yet it is central; all theories of gender must explain both difference and domination. Whereas other theories explain male domination as the result of sex differences, social constructionism explains differences as the result of domination.

Yet a discussion about power invariably makes men, in particular, uncomfortable or defensive. How many times have we heard a man say, when confronted with women's anger at gender-based inequality and discrimination, "Hey, don't blame me! I never raped anyone!" (This is analogous to white people's defensive response denying that one's family ever owned or continues to own slaves when confronted with the contemporary reality of racial oppression.) When challenged by the idea that the gender order means that men have power over women, men often respond with astonishment. "What do you mean, men have all the power? What are you talking about? I have no power at all. I'm completely powerless. My wife bosses me around, my children boss me around, my boss bosses me around. I have no power at all!" Most men, it seems, do not feel powerful.

Here, in a sense, is where feminism has failed to resonate for many men. Much of feminist theory of gender-based power derived from a symmetry between the structure of gender relations and women's individual experiences. Women, as a group, were not *in* power. That much was evident to anyone who cared to observe a corporate board, a university board of trustees, or a legislative body at any level anywhere in the world. Nor, individually, did women *feel* powerful. In fact, they felt constrained by gender inequality into stereotypic activities that prevented them from feeling comfortable, safe, and competent. So women were neither in power, nor did they feel powerful.

That symmetry breaks down when we try to apply it to men. Because although men may be *in* power everywhere one cares to look, individual men are not "in power," and they do not feel powerful. Men often feel themselves to be equally constrained by a system of stereotypic conventions that leaves them unable to live the lives to which they believe they are entitled. Men as a group are in power (when compared with women) but do not feel powerful. The feeling of powerlessness is one reason why so many men believe that they are the victims of reverse discrimination and oppose affirmative action. Or why some men's movement leaders comb through the world's cultures for myths and rituals to enable men to claim the power they want but do not feel they have.

Or even why many yuppies took to wearing “power ties” while they munched their “power lunches” during the 1980s and early 1990s—as if power were a fashion accessory for those who felt powerless.

Pop psychologist Warren Farrell called male power a “myth” because men and women have complementary roles and equally defamatory stereotypes of “sex object” and “success object.” Farrell often uses the analogy of the chauffeur to illustrate his case. The chauffeur is in the driver’s seat. He knows where he’s going. He’s wearing the uniform. You’d think, therefore, that he is in power. But from his perspective, someone else is giving the orders; he’s not powerful at all. This analogy does have some limited value: Individual men are not powerful, at least none but a small handful of individual men. But what if we ask one question of our chauffeur and try to shift the frame just a little. What if we ask him: What is the gender of the person who *is* giving the orders? (The lion’s share of riders in chauffeur-driven limousines are, after all, upper-class white men.) When we shift from the analysis of the individual’s experience to a different context, the relations between and among men emerge also as relations of power—power based on class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, and the like. “It is particular groups of men, not men in general, who are oppressed within patriarchal sexual relations, and whose situations are related in different ways to the overall logic of the subordination of women to men.”<sup>8</sup>

Like gender, power is not the property of individuals—a possession that one has or does not have—but rather a property of group life, of social life. Power *is*. It can neither be willed away nor ignored. Here is how the philosopher Hannah Arendt put it:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is “in power” we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with... disappears, “his power” also vanishes.<sup>9</sup>

To a sociologist, power is not an attitude or a possession; it’s not really a “thing” at all. It cannot be “given up” like an ideology that’s been outgrown. Power creates as well as destroys. It is deeply woven into the fabric of our lives—it is the warp of our interactions and the weft of our institutions. And it is so deeply woven into our lives that it is most invisible to those who are most empowered.

In general, sociology adds three crucial dimensions to the study of gender: (1) the life course perspective, (2) a macrolevel institutional analysis, and (3) a microlevel interactionist approach.

### **GENDER THROUGH THE LIFE COURSE**

I’ve suggested that role theory is ill-equipped to account for the significant differences among different groups of women or men—differences of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. Gender identities and expressions vary far more than the prescriptive roles to which we are presumably assigned. Nor can role theory fully embrace the changes in gender identity over the course of our lives. Sex-role theory overemphasizes the developmental decisiveness of early childhood as the moment that gender socialization happens. Developmental psychologists have provided compelling evidence



concerning the acquisition of gender identity in early childhood. Through socialization, especially in families and schools, the basic elements of gender identity are established, the foundation laid for future elaboration and expression.

But the story doesn't stop there. At its least convincing, some developmental psychology proposes that once one acquires gender identity it is fixed, permanent by age five or six. Sociologists embraced some of that idea, although they often pushed the age limit up to that tumultuous period called "adolescence." Surely, though, gender identity was fixed indelibly by puberty, which is marked, after all, by all the physical changes that mark the full-fledged assumption of adult masculinity and femininity.

Sociologists used to think that the three primary institutions of socialization were the family, school, and church; the three primary bearers of their socializing message were parents, teachers, and religious figures (priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, and the like). This model has proved inaccurate for two reasons. First, it assumes that socialization is a smooth process that is accomplished by the end of childhood, when family, school, and church have receded in significance in a person's life. Second, it views the socialization process from the point of view of the socializer, not the socialized. That is, from the point of view of the child, the chief agents of socialization—parents, teachers, and religious figures—translate as grown-ups, grown-ups, and grown-ups.

Kids know better. They also know that a primary agent of their socialization is their peer group—the other boys and girls, and later men and women—with whom they interact. They also know that the images and messages that daily surround them in the media are constantly giving them messages about what men and women are supposed to look and act like. Media and peer groups are, today, part of the pentagram of socializing institutions.

Media and peer groups, however, do not recede after early childhood; indeed, one might say they pick up where family, church, and school leave off. Some of the messages from peer groups and media reinforce what we've learned; other messages directly contradict those earlier messages. And it's up to us to sort it out.

Gender socialization continues throughout the life course. The process is neither smooth nor finite—it's bumpy and uneven and continues all our lives. What masculinity or femininity might mean to us in our twenties will mean something dramatically different to us in our forties or our sixties. And although a small part of that explanation has to do with biological stages of development—puberty, reproductive years, menopause, physical decline—these stages vary so significantly from culture to culture that sociologists search for the meaning of such biological shifts in the ways in which those aging bodies interact with their social context. The institutions in which we find ourselves change, and with those changes come different meanings of masculinity and femininity.

Take, for example, a well-known "factoid" about the differences between male and female sexuality. We hear, for example, that males reach their sexual "peak" at age eighteen or so but that women reach their sexual peak somewhat later, perhaps as late as their mid-thirties. This biological mismatch in hitting our sexual stride is often attributed to different maturational trajectories or different evolutionary strategies. He reaches his sexual peak when he is capable of producing the highest quantity of fertile sperm and thus is capable of fertilizing the highest number of females. She reaches her

sexual peak when she is leaving fertility behind and, in all likelihood, has already had all the children she will have.

To be sure, these different moments correspond with some hormonal shifts, especially for women as they end their childbearing years and enter menopause. But can we explain this divergence solely on different rates of maturation, hormones, and bodies? I don't think so. This divergence in sexualities is far more easily and convincingly explained by putting male and female sexuality in context. And that context is the relationship to marriage and family life. For men, what's experienced as sexy is unknown, mysterious, even a bit dangerous. Men reach their sexual peak early because that's when their sex life is unconstrained by marriage. By contrast, women often feel that they need the security of a stable relationship to really let themselves explore their sexuality: They reach their peak because marriage provides that trust and intimacy that activate women's pleasure. What's more, women's fertility is frequently accompanied by a certain "danger"—unwanted pregnancy—that is hardly an aphrodisiac. Could it be that women reach their sexual peak when they are in a stable and secure relationship with someone they trust enough to give full voice to their desires and don't have to worry about the possibility of unwanted pregnancy as a result?

Or take that staple of daytime self-help talk shows: the midlife crisis. In the 1970s, two best-selling books, *Seasons of a Man's Life* (D. J. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, M. H. Levinson, and McKee, 1978) and *Passages* (Sheehy, 1976) popularized the belief that middle-aged men (and to a lesser extent, women) go through a developmental "crisis" characterized by a pressure to make wholesale changes in their work, relationships, and leisure. For men, stereotypical responses to this pressure might include divorcing their wives to date younger women, pursuing lifelong ambitions, changing jobs, buying a sports car, growing a ponytail, and piercing an ear or taking up adventurous and risky hobbies and suddenly professing a newfound love of hip-hop (figure 5.1).

The idea of midlife crisis was embraced by a large segment of mainstream American culture. Middle-aged people found the concept intuitively compelling as a way of understanding changes in their own feelings and behaviors. Others employed it as a useful explanation of erratic behavior in their middle-aged adult parents or friends. Thirty years later, it remains a popular concept, the subject of pop psychology books and websites offering advice to people who struggle with the symptoms of the "crisis": depression, angst, irrational behavior, and strong urges to seek out new partners.

Careful research clearly demonstrates that this so-called crisis is not typical. Most men do not experience any sort of crisis in their middle adult years. Disconfirming research became available shortly after the concept was introduced (Costa and McCrae, 1978; Valliant, 1978), and more recent research finds no empirical support for midlife crisis as a universal experience for either men or women. Midlife does present a series of developmental challenges, and some middle-aged men do respond in ways that fit the stereotype. However, people go through challenges and crises in every life stage. The triggers are usually changes in work, health, or relationships rather than a mere accumulation of birthdays.<sup>10</sup>

In the largest study to date on midlife, Elaine Wethington demonstrated that the midlife crisis is far from inevitable. Yet more than 25 percent of those over age thirty-five surveyed (all residing in the United States) *believed* that they have had such a crisis.



**Figure 5.1.** Male midlife crises often provide fodder for popular films. In *City Slickers* (1991), Billy Crystal (center) flanked by Daniel Stern and Bruno Kirby play three middle-class guys who bring in a herd of steer on a dude ranch adventure. Courtesy of The Everett Collection.

Upon further investigation, about half of these reports reflected only a time of stressful life events, not a sustained period of loss of balance and searching.<sup>11</sup>

Belief in midlife crisis may partially hinge on what's called "*confirmation bias*," whereby a single case or a few cases of the expected behavior confirm the belief, especially when the behavior is attention-getting or widely reported. Less-obvious disconfirming behavior is easier to ignore. In other words, if we happen to know a man who spent the year after his forty-fifth birthday getting a divorce, dating a twenty-two-year-old, buying a sports car, and taking up skydiving, we might believe in the midlife crisis, even though we know a dozen other middle-aged men who have done none of these things.

### GENDER AND AGING

Gender is a lifelong project. As people age in the contemporary West, men receive a great deal less stigma than do women. On men, gray hair and wrinkles are signs of maturity; on women, signs of "getting old." It's not uncommon for a man to date or marry a woman twenty years younger, but rare—and labeled bizarre—when an older woman dates or marries a younger man. In 1991, comedienne Martha Raye, age seventy-five, married forty-two-year-old Mark Harris, and the media was scandalized. Speculation ran rampant about Mark's ulterior motives. Surely he was just after her money. How could a forty-two-year-old man find a seventy-five-year-old woman attractive? But when Tony Randall, also age seventy-five, married Heather Harlan, a full fifty years his junior, he was universally praised for his vigor, and no one questioned Heather's motives. (Both couples stayed married until the older partner's death.)

In the media, much older men are commonly paired as romantic leads with much younger women. Michael Douglas was fifty-four when he played the husband of

twenty-six-year-old Gwyneth Paltrow in *A Perfect Murder* (1998). Harrison Ford was fifty-seven when he romanced thirty-nine-year-old Kristen Scott Thomas in *Random Hearts* (1999). In *Entrapment* (1999), thirty-year-old Catherine Zeta-Jones played an insurance agent who falls in love with a jewel thief played by Sean Connery. He was sixty-nine, old enough to be her grandfather.

But women are almost never paired romantically with younger men in the movies (unless the women are around twenty-three and the “younger man” is fifteen, as in *Private Lessons*, *Tadpole*, and *Summer of '42*). In fact, most actresses have trouble finding any work at all after age forty. In the 2002 documentary *Searching for Debra Winger*, Roseanna Arquette interviews many actresses on the problems they have experienced being “old” in Hollywood. Debra Winger temporarily retired from acting in her late thirties when the offers stopped coming, even though she had won three Academy Award nominations. Daryl Hannah was in her mid-thirties when she was cast as the mother of a sixteen-year-old. Even superstars like Jane Fonda and Cher now find themselves relegated to supporting roles as mothers and grandmothers, while women under thirty play most of the romantic leads. Deciding who is old, and who is too old, seems to be a matter of cultural expectations, not biology.

As the meaning of age varies by gender, so, too, does the experience of aging. The meanings of masculinity and femininity that we take into adulthood and beyond resonate in different ways as we age. For example, men and women face retirement differently. Men value independence and stoic resolve, and so in retirement might end up with a more attenuated friendship and support network, fewer friends, and greater sense of isolation—which in turn might lead to earlier death because loneliness and isolation are risk factors for aging people. Women are far more likely to have maintained close contact with children, with workplace colleagues, and with friends and head into retirement with their larger friendship and support network intact. Buttressed by that support, women will be less isolated and lonely and therefore likely to live longer. Could this different expression of different gender ideologies partly explain the difference in women’s and men’s life expectancies? Not entirely, to be sure. But it probably pushes a bit.

And just as gender shapes our lives, so, too, should it structure our deaths. And gender is just as salient at the end of our lives as it was during them. Take, for example, when we die. Because women live longer than men, the elderly are more likely to be female. In the United States, the ratio of men to women is about 8:10 for those sixty-five to seventy-five, and by eighty-five, it decreases to 4:10.<sup>12</sup>

But why do women live longer? Earlier, I speculated that some small part of the reason has to do with the ways that gender ideology structures our sustaining networks of friends and kin. But some part is surely physical: Physicians have long speculated that women have stronger constitutions and more immunity to disease. They are less likely to fall victim to heart disease, because testosterone increases the level of “bad” cholesterol (low-density lipoprotein), whereas estrogen increases the level of “good” cholesterol (high-density lipoprotein). British researcher David Goldspink (2005) found that men’s hearts weaken much more rapidly as they age: Between the ages of eighteen and seventy, their hearts lose one-fourth of their power (but don’t worry, regular cardiovascular exercise can slow or stop the decline), but healthy seventy-year-old women have hearts nearly as strong as those of twenty-year-olds.

Because the gap is decreasing, one cannot attribute this difference to biology alone. What sociological reasons might account for women living longer? Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four, men are four to five times more likely to die than women, mostly from accidents: During this period of late adolescence and early adulthood, men often prove their masculinity through reckless and risky behavior, whereas women do not. At every age, men spend more time in the public sphere, where they are more likely to get into accidents, commit violent crimes, be victimized by crime, and to be exposed to illnesses and hazardous material. Meanwhile women spend more time at home. So as gender inequality lessens and more women work outside the home, we would predict that the gap will decrease.

The problem is that the life expectancy gap is decreasing everywhere, in both gender-polarized and egalitarian countries: 5.80 years in Norway and 5.70 years in Sri Lanka, 7.95 years in France and 4.31 years in Mongolia. In fact, it seems to be decreasing more rapidly in gender-polarized countries: 2.51 years in Ethiopia, 1.81 years in Pakistan; and in seven countries, including Bangladesh, Malawi, Namibia, and Afghanistan, men are living longer than women.

Sociologists explain this by pointing out that rich and poor countries are diverging far more than women and men are in those countries. In poor countries, both women and men are increasingly susceptible to poor nutrition or health care, HIV, or violence and war, and women to problem pregnancies. In wealthy countries, better health care and nutrition mean that both women and men are living longer. By 2040, European and American women will live to be about one hundred, and men will live to be ninety-nine.<sup>13</sup>

### **GENDER AS AN INSTITUTION**

My earlier argument that power is the property of a group, not an individual, is related to my argument that gender is as much a property of institutions as it is part of our individual identities. One of the more significant sociological points of departure from sex-role theory concerns the institutional level of analysis. As we've seen, sex-role theory holds that gender is a property of individuals—that gendered people acquire their gender identity and move outward, into society, to populate gender-neutral institutions. To a sociologist, however, those institutions are themselves gendered. Institutions create gendered normative standards, express a gendered institutional logic, and are major factors in the reproduction of gender inequality. The gendered identity of individuals shapes those gendered institutions, and the gendered institutions express and reproduce the inequalities that compose gender identity.

To illustrate this, let us undertake a short thought experiment. To start with, let's assume that (1) men are more violent than women (whether biologically derived or socialized, this is easily measurable by rates of violent crime); that (2) men occupy virtually all the positions of political power in the world (again, easily measurable by looking at all political institutions); and that (3) there is a significant risk of violence and war at any moment.

Now, imagine that when you awaken tomorrow morning each of those power positions in all those political institutions—every president and prime minister; every mayor and governor; every state, federal, or local official; every member of every House

of Representatives; and every Parliament around the world—was filled by a woman. Do you think the world would be any safer from the risk of violence and war? Do you think you'd sleep better that night?

Biological determinists and psychologists of sex roles would probably answer yes. Whether from fundamental biological differences in levels of testosterone, brain chemistries, or evolutionary imperatives, a biological perspective would probably conclude that because females are less violent and aggressive than men, the world would be safer. (It is ironic, then, that the same people who believe these biological differences are also among the least likely to support female candidates for political office.) And those who observe that different socialization produces women who are more likely to avoid hierarchy and competition and to search instead for peaceful solutions by another gendered value system would also breathe a collective sigh of relief.

“But,” I hear some of you saying, “what about the women who have already *been* heads of state? What about Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher? They're not exactly poster girls for a pacific ethic of care, are they?”

Indeed, not. And part of the reason why they were so unladylike in political office is that the office itself demands a certain type of behavior, independent of the gender of the person who holds it. Often it seems that no matter who occupies those positions, he—or she—can do little to transform them.

This observation is the beginning of a sociological perspective—the recognition that the institutions themselves express a logic—a dynamic—that reproduces gender relations between women and men and the gender order of hierarchy and power. Men *and* women have to express certain traits to occupy a political office, and their failure to do so will make the officeholder seem ineffective and incompetent. (That these criteria apply to men also, anyone who witnessed the gendered criticisms launched against Jimmy Carter for his being frightened by a scurrying rabbit or for his failure to invade Iran during the hostage crisis in 1979–1980 can testify.)

To argue that institutions are gendered is *only* the other half of the story. It's as simplistic to argue that the individuals who occupy those positions are genderless as it is to argue that the positions they occupy are gender-neutral. Gendered individuals occupy places within gendered institutions. And thus it is quite likely that if all the positions were filled with the gender that has been raised to seek peaceful negotiations instead of the gender that is accustomed to drawing lines in the sand, the gendered mandates of those institutions would be affected, modified, and moderately transformed. In short, if all those positions were filled with women, we might sleep more peacefully at night—at least a little bit more peacefully.

Another example will illustrate this in a different way. In chapter 2, I introduced the work of Barbara McClintock, the Nobel Prize-winning research cytogeneticist. McClintock came upon her remarkable discovery of the behavior of molecules by a very different route than that used by her male colleagues. Whereas earlier models had always assumed a hierarchically ordered relationship, McClintock, using what she called “feminine methods” and relying on her “feeling for the organism,” discovered that instead of each cell being ruled by a “master molecule,” cells were driven by a complex interaction among molecules. In this case, the gender of the person collided with the gendered logic of scientific inquiry to generate a revolutionary—and Nobel Prize-winning—insight.<sup>14</sup>

To say, then, that gender is socially constructed requires that we locate individual identity within a historically and socially specific and equally gendered place and time and that we situate the individual within the complex matrix of our lives, our bodies, and our social and cultural environments. A sociological perspective examines the ways in which gendered individuals interact with other gendered individuals in gendered institutions. As such, sociology examines the interplay of those two forces—identities and structures—through the prisms of socially created difference and domination.

Gender revolves around these themes—identity, interaction, institution—in the production of gender difference and the reproduction of gender inequality. These themes are quite complex, and the relationships between and among them are also complex. These are the processes and experiences that form core elements of our personalities, our interactions with others, and the institutions that shape our lives. These experiences are shaped by our societies, and we return the favor, helping to reshape our societies. We are gendered people living in gendered societies.

A social constructionist perspective, however, goes one step further than even this. Not only do gendered individuals negotiate their identities within gendered institutions, but also those institutions produce the very differences we assume are the properties of individuals. Thus “the extent to which women and men do different tasks, play widely disparate concrete social roles, strongly influences the extent to which the two sexes develop and/or are expected to manifest widely disparate personal behaviors and characteristics.” Different structured experiences produce the gender differences that we often attribute to people.<sup>15</sup>

Let me illustrate this phenomenon first with a mundane example and then with a more analytically complex one. At the most mundane level, think about public restrooms. In a clever essay on the “arrangement between the sexes,” the late sociologist Erving Goffman playfully suggested the ways in which these public institutions produce the very gender differences they are supposed to reflect. Though men and women are “somewhat similar in the question of waste products and their elimination,” Goffman observes, in public, men and women use sex-segregated restrooms, clearly marked “gentlemen” and “ladies.” These rooms have very different spatial arrangements, such as urinals for men and more elaborate “vanity tables” and other grooming facilities for women. We think of these as justifiably “separate but equal.”

But in the privacy of our own homes, we use the same bathrooms and feel no need for separate space. What is more, virtually no private homes have urinals for men, and few have separate and private vanity tables for women. (And, of course, in some cultures, these functions are performed publicly, with no privacy at all.) If these needs are biologically based, Goffman asks, why are they so different in public and in private? The answer, of course, is that they are not biologically based at all:

The *functioning* of sex differentiated organs is involved, but there is nothing in this functioning that biologically recommends segregation; *that* arrangement is a totally cultural matter . . . Toilet segregation is presented as a natural consequence of the difference between the sex-classes when in fact it is a means of honoring, if not producing, this difference.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, by using separate facilities, we “become” the gentlemen and ladies who are supposed to use those separate facilities. The physical separation of men and women creates the justification for separating them—not the other way around.

At the less mundane, but certainly no less important, level, take the example of the workplace. In her now-classic work, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter demonstrated that the differences in men’s and women’s behaviors in organizations had far less to do with men’s and women’s characteristics as individuals than it had to do with the structure of the organization. Organizational positions “carry characteristic images of the kinds of people that should occupy them,” she argued, and those who occupied them, whether women or men, exhibited those necessary behaviors. Though the criteria for evaluation of job performance, promotion, and effectiveness seem to be gender-neutral, they are, in fact, deeply gendered. “While organizations were being defined as sex-neutral machines,” she writes, “masculine principles were dominating their authority structures.” Once again, masculinity—the norm—was invisible.<sup>17</sup>

In a series of insightful essays, sociologist Joan Acker has expanded on Kanter’s early insights and specified the interplay of structure and gender. It is through our experiences in the workplace, Acker maintains, that the differences between women and men are reproduced and through which the inequality between women and men is legitimated. Institutions are like factories, and what they produce is gender difference. The overall effect of this is the reproduction of the gender order as a whole. Thus an institutional level cannot be left out of any explanation of gender—because institutions are fundamentally involved in both gender difference and gender domination. “Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender neutral,” she argues. “Rather, it is an integral part of those processes.”<sup>18</sup>

Institutions accomplish the creation of gender difference and the reproduction of the gender order, Acker argues, through several “gendered processes.” These gendered processes mean that “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine.” She observes five of these processes:

1. The production of gender divisions—the ways in which “ordinary organizational practices produce the gender patterning of jobs, wages, and hierarchies, power and subordination.” In the very organization of work, gender divisions are produced and reinforced, and hierarchies are maintained—often despite the intentions of well-meaning managers and supervisors.
2. The construction of symbols and images “that explain, express, reinforce, or sometimes oppose those divisions.” Gender images, such as advertisements, reproduce the gendering of positions so that the image of a successful manager or business executive is almost always an image of a well-dressed, powerful man.
3. The interactions between individuals—women and men, women and women, men and men, in all the forms and patterns that express dominance and submission. For example, conversations between supervisors and subordinates typically involve power dynamics, such as interruptions, sentence completion, and setting the topic for conversation, which, given the gendered positions within the organization, will reproduce observable conversational gender differences.



4. The internal mental work of individuals “as they consciously construct their understandings of the organization’s gendered structure of work and opportunity and the demands for gender-appropriate behaviors and attitudes.” This might include patterns of dress, speech, and general presentation of self.
5. The ongoing logic of organizations themselves—how the seemingly gender-neutral theories of organizational dynamics, bureaucracy, and organizational criteria for evaluation and advancement are actually very gendered criteria masquerading as “objective” and gender-neutral.<sup>19</sup>

As we’ve seen, sex-role theory assumed that gendered individuals enter gender-neutral sites, thus maintaining the invisibility of gender-as-hierarchy and specifically the invisible masculine organizational logic. On the other hand, many organizational theories assume that genderless “people” occupy those gender-neutral sites. The problem is that such genderless people are assumed to be able to devote themselves single-mindedly to their jobs, have no children or family responsibilities, and may even have familial supports for such single-minded workplace devotion. Thus the genderless jobholder turns out to be gendered as a man. Once again, the invisibility of masculinity as the unexamined norm turns out to reproduce the power differences between women and men.

One or two more examples should suffice. Many doctors complete college by age twenty-one or twenty-two, medical school by age twenty-five to twenty-seven, and then endure three more years of internship and residency, during which time they are occasionally on call for long stretches of time, sometimes even two or three days straight. They thus complete their residencies by their late twenties or early thirties. Such a program is designed for a male doctor—one who is not pressured by the ticking of a biological clock, one for whom the birth of children will not disrupt these time demands, and one who may even have someone at home taking care of the children while he sleeps at the hospital. No wonder women in medical school—who number nearly one-half of all medical students today—began to complain that they were not able to balance pregnancy and motherhood with their medical training. (The real wonder is that the male medical school students had not noticed this problem earlier!)

Similarly, lawyers just out of law school who take jobs with large corporate law firms are expected to bill up to fifty to sixty hours per week—a process that probably requires working eighty to ninety hours per week. Assuming at least six hours of sleep per night, a one-hour round-trip commute, and one half-day of rest, these young lawyers are going to have a total of about seventeen hours per week to eat, cook, clean their house, talk with and/or make love with their spouse (or date if they’re single), and spend time with their children. Without that half-day off on the weekend, they have about one hour per day for everything else. Failure to submit to this regime places a lawyer on a “mommy track” or a “daddy track,” which means that everyone will think well of that lawyer for being such an involved parent but that he or she is certain never to be promoted to partner, to join all the rest of the lawyers who made such sacrifices for their careers.

Or, finally, take academic tenure. In a typical academic career, a scholar completes a PhD about six to seven years after the BA, or roughly by the early thirties. Then he

or she begins a career as an assistant professor and has six more years to earn tenure and promotion. This is usually the most intense academic work period of a scholar's life—he or she works night and day to publish enough scholarly research and prepare and teach courses. The early thirties are also the most likely child-bearing years for professional women. The academic tenure clock is thus timed to a man's rhythms—and not just any man, but one who has a wife or other family supports to relieve him of family obligations as he works to establish his credentials. Remember the adage “publish or perish”? Often, to academics struggling to make tenure, it feels as though publishing requires that family life perish.

Observing the institutional dimension also offers the possibility to observe adjustment and readjustment within institutions as they are challenged. Sometimes, their boundaries prove more permeable than originally expected. For example, what happens when the boundaries between work and home become permeable, when women leave the home and enter the gendered workplace? Judith Gerson and Kathy Peiss suggest that boundaries “*within* the workplace (e.g., occupational segregation) and interactional microlevel boundaries assume increased significance in defining the subordinate position of women.” Thus occupational segregation can reproduce gender difference *and* gender inequality by assigning women to secondary statuses within organizations. For those women who enter nontraditional positions, though, microlevel boundary maintenance would come into play—“the persistence of informal group behavior among men (e.g., after-work socializing, the uses of male humor, modes of corporate attire)—act to define insiders and outsiders, thus maintaining gender-based distinctions.”<sup>20</sup>

Embedded in organizational structures that are gendered, subject to gendered organizational processes, and evaluated by gendered criteria, then, the differences between women and men appear to be the differences solely between gendered individuals. When gender boundaries seem permeable, other dynamics and processes can reproduce the gender order. When women do not meet these criteria (or, perhaps more accurately, when the criteria do not meet women's specific needs), we see a gender-segregated workforce and wage, hiring, and promotional disparities as the “natural” outcomes of already present differences between women and men. It is in this way that those differences are generated and the inequalities between women and men are legitimated and reproduced.

(One should, of course, note that it is through these same processes that the “differences” between working-class and professional men, between whites and people of color, and between heterosexuals and homosexuals are also produced and that the inequalities based on class or race or sexuality are legitimated and reproduced. Making gender visible in these organizational processes ought not to blind us to the complex interactions with other patterns of difference and principles of inequality. Just as a male pattern becomes the unexamined norm, so, too, does a white, heterosexual, and middle-class pattern become the unexamined norm against which others' experiences and performances are evaluated.)

The idea of organizational gender neutrality, then, is the vehicle by which the gender order is reproduced. “The theory and practice of gender neutrality,” writes Acker, “covers up, obscures, the underlying gender structure, allowing practices that perpetuate it to continue even as efforts to reduce gender inequality are also under way.”<sup>21</sup> Organizations reflect and produce gender differences; gendered institutions also

reproduce the gender order by which men are privileged over women and by which some men—white, middle class, heterosexual—are privileged over other men.

### “DOING GENDER”

There remains one more element in the sociological explanation of gender. According to sex-role theory, we acquire our gender identity through socialization, and afterward we are socialized to behave in masculine or feminine ways. It is thus the task of society to make sure that the men act in the masculine manner and that the women act in the feminine manner. Our identity is fixed, permanent, and—now—inherent in our personalities. We can no more cease being men or women than we can cease being human.

In an important contribution to the social constructionist perspective, sociologists Candace West and Don Zimmerman argued that gender is less a component of identity—fixed, static—that we take with us into our interactions, than it is the product of those interactions. They argued that “a person’s gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one *does*, and does recurrently, in interaction with others.” We are constantly “doing” gender, performing the activities and exhibiting the traits that are prescribed for us.<sup>22</sup>

If our sex-role identity were inherent, West and Zimmerman might ask, in what does it inhere? What are the criteria by which we sort people into those sex roles to begin with? Typically, our answer returns us to biology and, more specifically, to the primary sex characteristics that we believe determine which gender one will become. Biological sex—externally manifested genitalia—becomes socialized gender role. Those with male genitalia are classified in one way; those with female genitalia are classified in another way. These two sexes become different genders, which are assumed to have different personalities and require different institutional and social arrangements to accommodate their natural—and now socially acquired—differences.

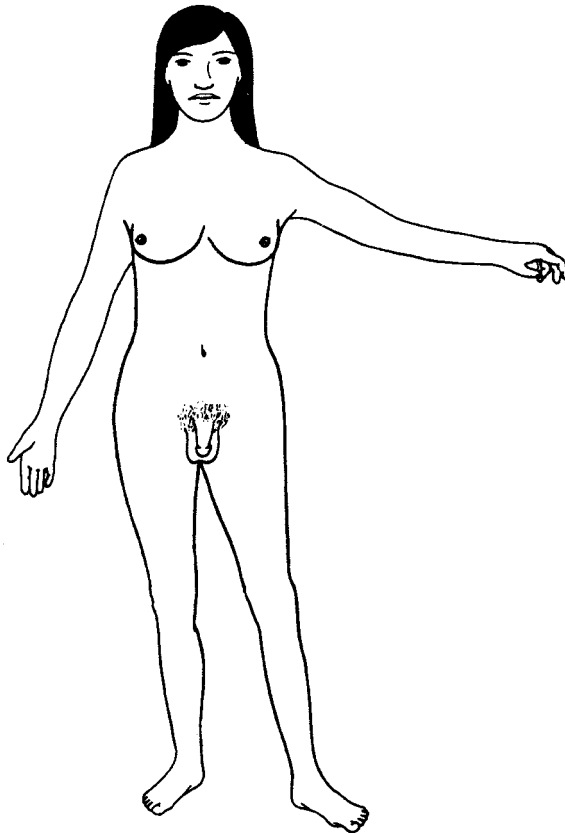
Most of the time we carry around these types of commonsense understandings. We see primary sex characteristics (those present at birth) as far more decisive than secondary sex characteristics (those that develop at puberty) for the assignment of gender-role identity. But how do we know? When we see someone on the street, it is his or her *secondary* sex characteristics that we observe—breast development, facial hair, musculature. Even more than that, it is the behavioral presentation of self—how someone dresses, moves, talks—that signals to us whether that someone is a man or a woman. It would be a strange world, indeed, if we had constantly to ask to see people’s genitals to make sure they were who they appeared to be!

One method that sociologists developed to interrogate this assumption has been to imagine that primary and secondary sex characteristics did not match. In many cases, “intersexed” infants, or hermaphrodites—whose primary sex characteristics cannot be easily discerned visually—have their genitals surgically reconstructed, depending upon the size of the penis and not on the presence or absence of Y chromosomes. To these surgeons, “chromosomes are less relevant in determining gender than penis size.” Therefore, to be labeled “male” does not necessarily depend on having one Y and one X chromosome, nor on the production of sperm, but rather on “the aesthetic condition of having an appropriately sized penis.” The surgeons assume that no “male” would want to live as a man with such minute genitalia, and so they “correct” what will

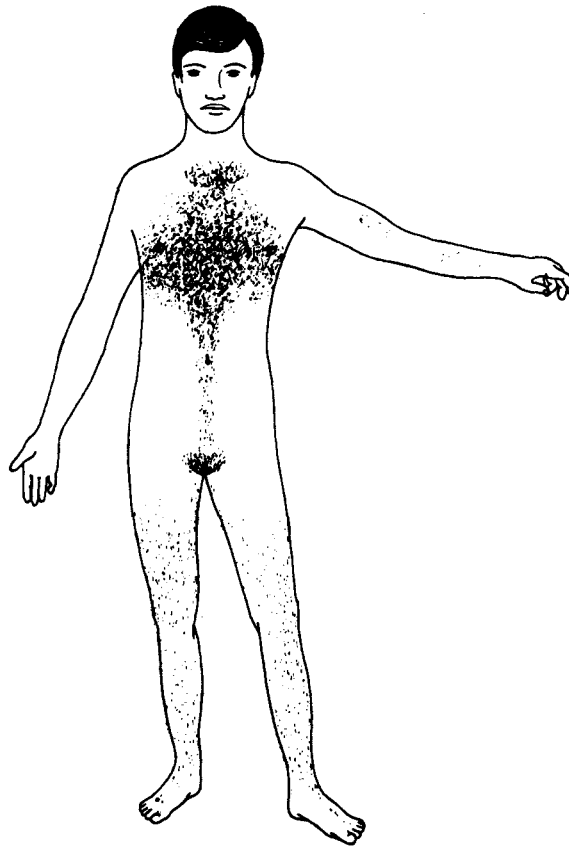
undoubtedly be perceived as a problem. (These surgically constructed females go on to live their lives as women.) It would appear, then, that size really does matter—at least to the doctors!<sup>23</sup>

This procedure has come under increasingly withering criticism from scientists, feminists, and intersexuals themselves, who are more interested in being happy with their bodies than in having someone “reassign” them because of some social idea that there can be only two sexes. Intersexuality, which affects about one thousand babies a year, pushes us to reconsider the genitals as the defining feature of biological sex. Gender, as William Reiner, a urologist and psychiatrist who treats intersex children, says, “has far more to do with other important structures than external genitals.”<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps, but the genitals remain the commonsense “location” of biological sex. In a brilliantly disconcerting study, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna proposed two images in which primary and secondary sex characteristics did not match (see figures 5.2 and 5.3). Which one is the “man,” and which is the “woman”? How can you tell? If you base your decision on primary sex characteristics—the genitals—you would have to conclude that many of the people



**Figure 5.2.** Figure with penis, breast, hips, no body hair, and long hair. From *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* by Kessler and McKenna. Copyright © 1985 by University of Chicago Press. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



**Figure 5.3.** Figure with vulva, no breasts, no hips, body hair, and short hair. From *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* by Kessler and Mckenna. Copyright © 1985 by University of Chicago Press. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

with whom you interact in daily life might be hiding their “true” selves. But, if you base your decision on what you see “above the waist,” which is more visible in daily life, you would have to conclude that many people may actually be a different sex from that which they appear to be.

Looking at those images, one might be tempted to dismiss this as the stuff of fantasy. After all, in real life, people’s genitals match their secondary sex characteristics, and we are always easily able to tell the difference, right? Well, maybe not always. Recall the consternation in the popular film *The Crying Game* when it was revealed, to both the audience and the film’s protagonist simultaneously, that Dil, the woman the lead was in love with, was actually a man. And remember everyone’s reaction when Dustin Hoffman revealed that Emily Kimberly was, in fact, Edward Kimberly in *Tootsie*; or the Broadway play *M Butterfly*, which was about a man who lived with a woman for more than thirty years *without ever realizing that he was actually a man*. And think of the commotion and confusion about Marilyn Manson in recent years. And what about the consternation and disgust expressed by men who pay cross-dressing prostitutes for



**Figure 5.4.** People whose biological sex is indeterminate often make others feel uncomfortable, because they disturb the casual assumption that everyone is either male or female, and that there is no “in-between.” Skits involving “Pat,” played by Julia Sweeney on *Saturday Night Live*, revolved around others trying to get Pat to reveal her true biological sex. Or is it *his* true biological sex? Courtesy of The Everett Collection.

oral sex and then find out that “she” is actually “he.” Such confusion is often the basis for comedy. Knowing whether someone is male or female is far more important to the observer than it often is to the observed, as fans of the television program *Saturday Night Live* will recall with the ambiguous character, “Pat.” People who interacted with Pat were constantly trying to trick him/her into revealing what he/she “really” was, while Pat nonchalantly answered their questions and eluded every rhetorical trap (figure 5.4).

Of course, these are all media creations, and in real life, “passing” is far more difficult and far less common. But one reason we enjoy such a parade of such ambiguous characters is because gender certainty is so important to us. Without it, we feel as if we have lost our social bearings in the world and are threatened with a kind of “gender vertigo,” in which the dualistic conceptions that we believe are the foundations of our social reality turn out to be more fluid than we believed or hoped.<sup>25</sup> It’s as though

## Oh Really?

Okay, you've convinced me in chapter 3 that there are more than only two genders. But surely there are two, *and only two* biological sexes, right? Male and female. Well, no. The National Institutes of Health has four categories of "intersexed" people:

**XX intersex:** A person with the chromosomes and ovaries of a woman, but with the external genitalia that appear male. (Usually the result of exposure to male hormones in utero or CAH). The person has a normal uterus, but the labia fuse and the clitoris is large and "penis-like."

**XY intersex:** A person with XY chromosomes, but with ambiguous or clearly female genitalia. Internally, testes may be absent, malformed, or normal. In the most famous cases of male pseudo-hermaphrodites in the Dominican Republic, this is caused by a specific deficiency in 5-alpha reductase. The child appears female until puberty, when their bodies are "transformed" into male.

**True gonadal intersex:** A person with both ovarian and testicular tissue in one or both gonads. The cause of true gonadal intersexuality is unknown.

**Complex or undetermined intersex:** Other chromosomal combinations, such as XXY, XXX, or XO (only one chromosome) can also result in ambiguous sex development.

our notions of gender are anchored in quicksand. One sociologist reported how she became disturbed by the sexual ambiguity of a computer salesperson:

The person who answered my questions was truly a salesperson. I could not categorize him/her as a woman or a man. What did I look for? (1) Facial hair: She/he was smooth skinned, but some men have little or no facial hair. (This varies by race, Native Americans and Blacks often have none.) (2) Breasts: She/he was wearing a loose shirt that hung from his/her shoulders. And, as many women who suffered through a 1950s adolescence know to their shame, women are often flat-chested. (3) Shoulders: His/hers were small and round for a man, broad for a woman. (4) Hands: Long and slender fingers, knuckles a bit large for a woman, small for a man. (5) Voice: Middle range, unexpressive for a woman, not at all the exaggerated tones some gay males affect. (6) His/her treatment of me: Gave off no signs that would let me know if I were of the same or different sex as this person. There were not even any signs that he/she knew his/her sex would be difficult to categorize and I wondered about this even as I did my best to hide these questions so I would not embarrass him/her while we talked of computer paper. I left still not knowing the sex of my salesperson, and was disturbed by that unanswered question (child of my culture that I am).<sup>26</sup>

Transvestites and cross-dressers reveal the artifice of gender. Gender is a performance, a form of drag, by which, through the successful manipulation of props, signs, symbols, behaviors, and emotions, we attempt to convince others of our successful acquisition of masculinity or femininity.

By contrast, transgendered people who have had genital reconstructive surgery often reinstate anatomy as the chief signifier of gender identity, as if a man could

not be a “real” woman as long as he possessed a penis, or a woman could not be a “real” man as long as she did not possess one. Often transgendered people—or transsexuals—enact an exaggerated set of gendered traits of their newly reconstructed biological sex. Male-to-female transsexuals often become hyperfeminine, prissy, and passive; female-to-male transsexuals may become assertively and aggressively masculine.

Cross-dressers know better, or rather, know different: As “social constructionists,” they know that successfully being a man or a woman simply means convincing others that you are what you appear to be. Just ask RuPaul, who seems to float almost effortlessly between the two. (I say “seems” advisedly because it probably takes “him” as long to accomplish the male presentation of self as it does to accomplish the female.) Or ask Alison Laing, a husband and a father, who spends about 80 percent of his time dressed in women’s clothes and 20 percent dressed as a man. “We don’t have to live in gender boxes,” he says.<sup>27</sup>

Most of us find the walls of those boxes enormously comforting. We learn gender performance early in childhood, and it remains with us virtually all our lives. When our gender identities are threatened, we will often retreat to displays of exaggerated masculinity or exaggerated femininity. And when our sense of others’ gender identity is disrupted or dislodged, we can become anxious, even violent. “We’re so invested in being men or women that if you fall outside that easy definition of what a man or woman is, a lot of people see you as some kind of monster,” commented Susan Stryker, who is a male-to-female transsexual. Many transsexuals are murdered or attacked every year.<sup>28</sup>

The fascinating case of “Agnes” reported by Harold Garfinkle also demonstrates these themes. Agnes was first encountered in the late 1950s by a psychiatrist, Robert Stoller, and by Garfinkle, a sociologist. Though Agnes appeared in every way to be a very feminine woman, she also had a penis, which she regarded as a biological mistake. Agnes “knew” she was a woman and acted (and demanded to be treated) as a woman. “I have always been a girl,” she proclaimed to her interviewers, and she regarded her early childhood socialization as a relentless trauma of being forced to participate in activities for boys, like sports. Because genitals were not “the essential signs of her femininity,” Agnes instead referred to her prominent breasts and her lifelong sense that she was, in fact, female. “Her self-described feminine feelings, behavior, choices of companions, and the like were never portrayed as matters of decision or choice but were treated as *given* as a natural fact,” writes Garfinkle. (Revealingly, Garfinkle refers to Agnes, as I have, with a feminine pronoun, although biologically Agnes possessed male genitalia.)<sup>29</sup>

Understanding how we do gender, then, requires that we make visible the performative elements of identity and also the audience for those performances. It also opens up unimaginable possibilities for social change; as Suzanne Kessler points out in her study of “intersexed people” (hermaphrodites):

If authenticity for gender rests not in a discoverable nature but in someone else’s proclamation, then the power to proclaim something else is available. If physicians recognized that implicit in their management of gender is the notion that finally, and always, people construct gender as well as the social systems that are grounded



in gender-based concepts, the possibilities for real societal transformations would be unlimited.<sup>30</sup>

Kessler's gender utopianism does raise an important issue in the sociological perspective. In saying that we "do" gender, we are saying that gender is not only something that is done to us. We create and re-create our own gendered identities within the contexts of our interactions with others and within the institutions we inhabit.

### **A SOCIOLOGY OF RAPE**

In previous chapters, we've illustrated theoretical perspectives by observing how each perspective deals with one specifically gendered phenomenon—rape. We've seen, for example, how some evolutionary biologists explain rape as an evolutionary reproductive strategy for "losers" who are unable to pass on their genetic inheritance by old-fashioned seduction. (It is therefore evolutionary biologists, not mainstream feminists, who insist that rape and sex are the same thing!) And we've seen how anthropologists undermine such biological arguments, suggesting instead that rape varies dramatically from one culture to another and that what causes the differences between rape-prone and rape-free societies is the status of women. Where women are valued and honored, rape rates are exceptionally low. Where women are degraded and devalued, rape rates are high.

Psychologists enable us to differentiate between rapists and nonrapists by understanding the psychodynamic processes that lead an individual man to such aberrant behavior. Whether because of childhood trauma, unresolved anger at his mother, a sense of inadequate gender identity, rapists are characterized by their deviance from the norm. "Rape is always a symptom of some psychological dysfunction, either temporary and transient, or chronic and repetitive." In the popular view, rapists are "sick individuals."<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen, the sociological perspective builds upon these other perspectives. But it also offers a radical departure from them. Rape is particularly illustrative because it is something that is performed almost exclusively by one gender—men—although it is done to both men and women. Thus it is particularly useful for teasing out the dynamics of both difference (because only men do it) and dominance (because its primary function is the domination of either women or men). Instead of seeing a collection of sick individuals, sociologists look at how ordinary, how normal, rapists can be—and then at the culture that legitimates their behaviors. It also assesses the processes and dynamics that force all women to confront the possibility of sexual victimization—a process that reproduces both gender division and gender inequality.

Sociological studies of rapists have found that many are married or have steady, regular partners. Studies of gang rape reveal an even more "typical" guy who sees himself simply as going along with his friends. Rapists see their actions in terms that express power differentials between women and men. They see what they do to women as their "right," a sense of entitlement to women's bodies. And they often see their behavior in light of their relationship with other men. For example, the members of *Spur Posse*, a group of teenage boys in southern California accused of numerous acts of date rape and acquaintance rape, kept score of their "conquests" using athletes' uniform

numbers—which only the other members could understand. And during wartime, the rape of vanquished women becomes a form of communication between the victor and the loser, and women’s bodies are the “spoils of war.”

Although rape is an act of aggression by an individual man, or a group of men, it is also a social problem that women, as a group, face. Women may deal with rape as individuals—by changing their outfits, their patterns of walking and talking, their willingness to go to certain places at certain times—but rape affects all women. Rape is a form of “sexual terrorism,” writes legal theorist Carol Sheffield, a “system of constant reminders to women that we are vulnerable and targets solely by virtue of our gender. The knowledge that such things can and do happen serves to keep all women in the psychological condition of being aware that they are potential victims.”<sup>32</sup>

To the sociologist, then, rape expresses both a structure of relations and an individual event. At the individual level, it is the action of a man (or group of men) against a woman. It is sustained by a cultural apparatus that interprets it as legitimate and justified. It keeps women in a position of vulnerability as potential targets. In this way, rape reproduces both gender difference (women as vulnerable and dependent upon men for protection, women afraid to dare to enter male spaces such as the street for fear of victimization) and gender inequality.<sup>33</sup>

#### **TOWARD AN EXPLANATION OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER RELATIONS**

So how shall we think about gender from a sociological perspective? The elements of a definition seem clear enough. We shall explore three related levels—(1) identity, (2) interaction, and (3) institution—and, of course, the interactions among them, in order to explain the related phenomena—gender difference and gender inequality.

First, we understand that gender is not a “thing” that one possesses, but rather a set of activities that one *does*. When we do gender, we do it in front of other people; it is validated and legitimated by the evaluations of others. Gender is less a property of the individual than it is a product of our interactions with others. West and Zimmerman call gender a “managed property,” which is “contrived with respect to the fact that others will judge and respond to us in particular ways.” Women and men are distinct social groups, constituted in “concrete, historically changing—and generally unequal—social relationships.” What the great British historian E. P. Thompson once wrote about class applies equally to gender. Gender “is a relationship, not a thing”—and like all relationships we are active in their construction. We do not simply inherit a male or female sex role, but we actively—interactively—constantly define and redefine what it means to be men or women in our daily encounters with one another. Gender is something one *does*, not something one *has*.<sup>34</sup>

Second, we understand that we do gender in every interaction, in every situation, in every institution in which we find ourselves. Gender is a situated accomplishment, as much an aspect of interaction as it is of identity. As Messerschmidt puts it, “gender is a situated accomplishment in which we produce forms of behavior seen by others in the same immediate situation as masculine or feminine.” Gender is what we bring to these interactions and what is produced in them as well.<sup>35</sup>

Nor do we do gender in a genderless vacuum but, rather, in a gendered world, in gendered institutions. Our social world is built on systemic, structural inequality based

on gender; social life reproduces both gender difference and gender inequality. We need to think of masculinity and femininity “not as a single object with its own history, but as being constantly constructed within the history of an evolving social structure.” As Katherine Pyke defines it, gender is:

an emergent property of situated interaction rather than a role or attribute. Deeply held and typically nonconscious beliefs about men’s and women’s essential natures shape how gender is accomplished in everyday interactions. Because those beliefs are molded by existing macrostructural power relations, the culturally appropriate ways of producing gender favor men’s interests over those of women. In this manner, gendered power relations are reproduced.<sup>36</sup>

In short, sociology is uniquely equipped to understand both what is really different between women and men and what is not really different but only seems to be, as well as the ways in which gender difference is the product of—and not the cause of—gender inequality. We are gendered people living gendered lives in a gendered society—but we do actually live on the same planet. (In fact, it may be that only on this planet would such differences make a difference.)

In the remainder of this book, we’ll look at some of the institutions that create gender difference and reproduce gender inequality—families, schools, workplaces—and observe some of the ways in which those differences and that inequality are expressed through our interactions with one another—in love, sex, friendship, and violence.