

GENDERED LIVES

Communication, Gender, and Culture

EIGHTH EDITION

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Exploring Gendered Lives**CHANGING NAMES—NOT
EQUAL OPPORTUNITY**

Although most people say they think it's fine for women not to take men's names when they marry, fewer than 10% of women depart from the tradition of taking their husbands' names (Suter, 2004). Even fewer men are willing to consider changing their names upon marrying. And those who do may be in for a surprise, as Elizabeth Batton and Garrett Sorenson discovered. In August of 2006, the two New Yorkers married and each wanted to take the other's last name. Elizabeth had no problem changing her surname to Sorenson—she simply put her new name on the marriage certificate. For Garrett, changing names was not so easy. New York, like most states, assumes that men will not change their names when they marry. To do so, Garrett had to petition the court, advertise in a newspaper, and pay a significant sum in legal fees (Porter, 2007).

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN

Are women and men really as different as pop psychologists would have us believe? Certainly, there are some differences between the sexes that we need to understand. There is also substantial variation within each sex as a result of diversity in experience, heredity, sexual orientation, race, culture, and class. And there are many similarities between women and men—ways in which the two sexes are more alike than different (Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Wright, 2006).

Katherine's commentary is important. Because there are similarities between the sexes and variations within each sex, it is difficult to find language to discuss general patterns of communication. Terms such as *women* and *men* are troublesome because they imply that all women can be grouped together and all men can be grouped together. When we say, "Women's communication is more personal than men's," the statement is true of most, but not all, women and men. Certainly some women don't engage in personal talk, and some men do. Many factors, including race, economic class, and sexual identity, shape how specific women and men communicate (Zinn, Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Messner, 2007).

Thinking and speaking as if there were some stable, distinct essence that is women and some stable, distinct essence that is men is referred to as **essentializing**,* the tendency to reduce something or someone to certain characteristics that we assume are essential to its nature and present in every member of a category, such as men or women. When we essentialize, we mistakenly presume that all members of a sex are alike. Essentializing obscures the range of characteristics possessed by individual women and men and conceals differences among members of each sex. In this book, we will discuss generalizations about women and men, but this does not imply any essential qualities possessed by all members of a sex. We'll also take time to notice exceptions to generalizations about gender.

* Boldfaced terms appear in the Glossary at the end of this book.

Michael

The other day in class, we were talking about whether women should have combat duty. I'm really uncomfortable with where I stand on this, since I think one way, but I feel another. I do think women should have to serve just as much as men do. I've never thought it was right that they didn't have to fight. And I think women are just as competent as men at most things and could probably be good soldiers. But then when I think about my mom or my sister or my girlfriend being in the trenches, having to kill other people, maybe being a prisoner who is tortured and assaulted, I just feel that's wrong. It doesn't seem right for women to be involved in killing when they're the ones who give life. Then, too, I want to protect my girlfriend and sister and mom from the ugliness and danger of war.

But then, this other part of me says, "Hey, guy, you know that kind of protectiveness is a form of chauvinism." I just don't know where I stand on this except that I'm glad I don't have to decide whether to send women into combat!

SEX

Although many people use the terms *gender* and *sex* interchangeably, they have distinct meanings. *Sex* is a designation based on biology, whereas *gender* is socially constructed and expressed. In most cases, sex and gender go together; most men are primarily masculine, and most women are primarily feminine. In some cases, however, a male expresses himself more femininely than most men, or a woman expresses herself in more masculine ways than most women. Sex

In just these opening pages, I've used the words *gender* and *sex* several times, but we haven't yet defined them precisely. The next section of this chapter provides definitions to give us a shared understanding of what gender and sex are, how they are shaped by the culture in which we live, and how communication reflects, expresses, and re-creates gender in our everyday lives.

RELATIONSHIPS AMONG GENDER, CULTURE, AND COMMUNICATION

When asked to discuss a particular aspect of nature, John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, said he could not discuss any single part of the natural world in isolation. He noted that each part is "hitched to the universe," meaning that every part is connected to all other parts of nature. Likewise, gender, culture, and communication are interlinked, and they are hitched to the whole universe. Because this is so, we cannot study any one of them without understanding a good deal about the other two. What gender means depends heavily on cultural values and practices; a culture's definitions of masculinity and femininity shape expectations about how individual women and men should communicate; and how individuals communicate establishes meanings of gender that, in turn, influence cultural views.

and gender are inconsistent for transgendered individuals, who have the physical characteristics of one sex but identify strongly as the other sex. Because sex is the less complex concept, we'll explain it first, and then discuss gender.

A person is designated male or female based on external genitalia (penis and testes in males, clitoris and vagina in females) and internal sex organs (ovaries and uterus in females, prostate gland in males). Genitalia and other sex markers are determined by chromosomes. In most cases, human development is guided by 23 pairs of chromosomes, and only one pair determines sex. What we consider a person's sex is determined by chromosomes, usually a pair. The presence or absence of a Y chromosome determines whether a fetus will develop into what we recognize as male or female. Thus, people labeled female usually have XX sex chromosomes and people labeled male usually have XY sex chromosomes.

You might have noticed that I qualified discussion of genetic determination of sex by using the word *usually*. That's because there are occasional variations in the sex chromosomes. Some people have an XO chromosomal pair. In other cases, there are three, rather than the usual two, chromosomes that determine sex: XXX, XXY, or XYY sex chromosomes (Blackless, Charuvastra, Derryek, Fausto-Sterling, Lauzanne, & Lee, 2000; Dreger, 2000). Occasionally, an individual has some XY cells and some XX cells (Gorman & Cole, 2004). All fetuses (and people) have cells with at least one X chromosome because it carries genes essential to life (Jegalian & Lahn, 2001). Because males typically have only a single X chromosome, they are more vulnerable to a number of X-linked recessive conditions than are females, who have two X chromosomes and are unlikely to have an X-linked recessive condition on both. As long as there is a single Y chromosome, a fetus will develop into what we label male, although an XXY or XYY male may differ in some respects from an XY male.

Some children are born with some biological characteristics of each sex. Traditionally, people whose internal and external genitalia are inconsistent were called *hermaphrodites*, a term from Greek mythology. According to

Tracy

The issue of women in combat really troubles me. I have a son who is 17 and a daughter who is 15. I don't want either of them in combat, but I've always known my son could be in combat. Would I argue that my son should be and my daughter shouldn't be? That's like saying I value her life more than his. I can't say that.

Katherine

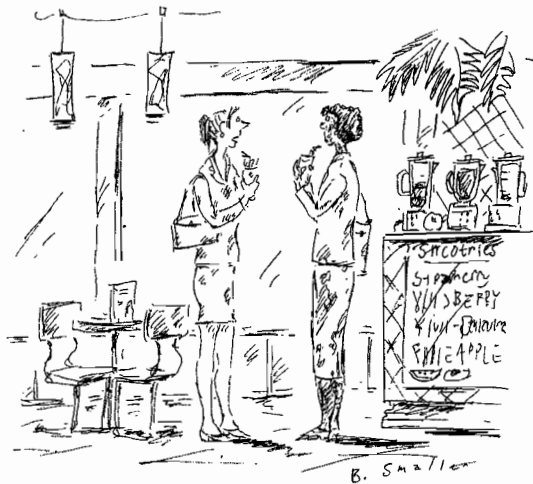
I am really skeptical of books that describe women and men as "opposite" sexes. They focus on a few ways that most women and most men are different. They totally ignore all of the ways that women and men are alike. Even worse is that they act like all women are the same and all men are the same. People are just such individuals that you can't sum them up as "man" or "woman."

the myth, the god Hermes and the goddess Aphrodite had a son whom they named Hermaphroditos. When the young woman Salmacis saw Hermaphroditos, she immediately fell in love and begged the gods to join her with him so that they would never be apart. Granting Salmacis's wish, the gods joined them into a single body that was both male and female. Today, the term *intersexed* is preferred by people who have biological qualities of each sex.

Sexual development is also influenced by hormones. Every person starts life as an embryo, which has both müllerian ducts that develop into female reproductive systems and wolffian ducts that develop into male reproductive systems (Rosenberg, 2007). About seven or eight weeks into gestation, hormones influence sexual differentiation in the fetus. When pregnancy proceeds routinely, fetuses with a Y chromosome are bathed in androgens that ensure development of male sex organs, and fetuses without a Y chromosome receive fewer androgens, so female sex organs develop. In some cases, however, a genetically female fetus (XX) is exposed to excessive progesterone and may not develop the usual female genitalia. The opposite is also true: If a male fetus is deprived of progesterone during the critical period of sexual differentiation, his male genitalia may not develop, and he will appear physically female (Pinsky, Erickson, & Schimke, 1999).

The influence of hormones does not end at birth. They continue to affect our development by determining whether we will menstruate, how much body hair we will have and where it will grow, how much fat and muscle tissue we will develop, and so forth. Because male fetuses receive greater amounts of

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"Sex brought us together, but gender drove us apart."

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SOCIAL VIEWS OF INTERSEXUALITY

For many years, infants who were born with ambiguous genitals routinely underwent "normalizing surgery" to reconstruct genitals to be more consistently male or female (Crouch, 1998; Lorber, 2001).

But is it possible that intersexed people don't need to be "fixed"? Recently, a number of scholars, scientists, doctors, and laypeople have advocated acceptance of intersexuality (Gorman & Cole, 2004; Kailey, 2006; Preves, 2004; Rosenberg, 2007; Sheridan, 2001). Adult intersexuals within the transgender movement challenge society's view that they are abnormal. They believe that being intersexed is not a disease or problem but just another form of human identity. In other words, maybe there are multiple—not just two—possibilities for sex and gender.

Actually, intersexuality—or, at least, the claim to that identity—is not a new phenomenon. Deborah Rudacille (2006) found records from 1629 describing Thomas Hall, who lived in the Jamestown settlement and claimed to be both a man and a woman. A number of indigenous groups, including several Native American tribes, historically recognized and celebrated "two spirit" people—those who were both male and female (Rudacille, 2006).

The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) has three primary missions: (1) to affirm a positive identity for intersexed people; (2) to change social attitudes toward intersexuality; and (3) to stop "normalizing surgery."

Visit the website at <http://www.isna.org>. Another site that provides information on intersexed and transgendered people is <http://www.itpeople.org>.

hormones than female fetuses, they become more sensitive than females to hormonal activity, especially during puberty (Tavris, 1992).

Biology *influences* how we develop, but it doesn't absolutely *determine* behavior, personality, and so on. Nor does biology stipulate the meaning that members of a culture assign to particular behaviors—which ones are valued, which ones devalued. More important than whether biological differences exist is how we perceive and treat differences. This moves us into discussion of a second concept: gender.

GENDER

Gender is a considerably more complex concept than sex. There is nothing a person does to acquire her or his sex. It is a classification that society makes based on genetic and biological factors, and, for most people, it endures throughout their lives. Gender, however, is neither innate nor necessarily stable. It is defined by society and expressed by individuals as they interact with others and media in their society. Further, gender changes over time. We are born male or female (sex), but we learn to act in masculine and/or feminine ways (gender). Gender is a social, symbolic construct that varies across

cultures, over time within a given culture, over the course of individuals' life spans, and in relation to the other gender. We'll elaborate these aspects of gender.

What gender means and how we express it depend on a society's values, beliefs, and preferred ways of organizing collective life. Consider current meanings of masculinity and femininity in America. To be masculine is to be strong, ambitious, successful, rational, and emotionally controlled. Although these requirements are perhaps less rigid than they were in earlier eras, they remain largely intact. Those we regard as "real men" still don't cry in public, and "real men" are successful and powerful in their professional and public lives (Kimmel, 2000a, 2000b, 2005).

Femininity in our era is also relatively consistent with earlier views, although there is increasing latitude in what is considered appropriate for women. To be feminine is to be physically attractive, deferential, emotionally expressive, nurturing, and concerned with people and relationships (Spence & Buckner, 2000). Those who embody the cultural definition of femininity still don't allow themselves to outdo men (especially their partners), to disregard others' feelings, or to put their needs ahead of others'. "Real women" still look good, adore children, and care about homemaking.

Gender is learned. From infancy on, we are encouraged to learn how to embody the gender that society prescribes for us. Young girls are often cautioned, "Don't be selfish—share with others" and "Be careful—don't hurt yourself." They are praised for looking pretty, taking care of others (including dolls), and being nice. Young boys, in contrast, are more likely to be admonished, "Don't be a sissy," "Go after what you want," and "Don't cry." Usually, males are reinforced for strength, independence, and success, particularly in competitive arenas.

Bishetta

I remember when I was very little, maybe 5 or so. My brother and I were playing outside in the garden, and Mom saw us. Both of us were coated with dirt—our clothes, our skin, everything.

Mom came up to the edge of the garden and shouted, "Bishetta, you get out of that garden right now. Just look at you. Now, what do you think folks will think of a dirty little girl? You don't want people to think you're not a lady, do you?" She didn't say a word to my brother, who was just as dirty.

Although individuals learn gender and embody it, gender is not strictly personal. Rather, gender grows out of cultural ideas that stipulate the social *meaning* and *expectation* of each sex. Because our society's views of gender permeate public and private life, we tend to see them as normal, natural, and right. When society constantly represents women and men in particular ways, it is difficult to imagine that masculinity and femininity could be defined differently. But, as we will see later in this chapter, masculinity and femininity come in many forms across cultures and history.

The fact that the social meanings of gender are taught to us does not mean we are passive recipients of

cultural meanings. We make choices to accept cultural prescriptions or to modify or reject them. Individuals who internalize and embody cultural prescriptions for gender existing social views. People who reject conventional prescriptions and step outside of social meanings for gender often provoke changes in cultural views. In the early part of the nineteenth century, for instance, many women challenged social views that women were not entitled to vote or pursue higher education. In defying their era's definition of women, these individuals transformed social views of women and the rights to which they are entitled.

Today, conventional views of both sex and gender are being challenged by people who define themselves as queer or gender queer (Hirschfeld & Wolf, 2005; Sloop, 2004, 2006). Many people who define themselves as gender queer reject the binary categories of male and female, masculine and feminine. They value the spaces in between, around, and beyond those two bipolar categories. In Chapter 2, we'll look more closely at queer theory, which gives insight into the entire range of gender identities.

Meanings of gender are also changed by personal communication. Role models, for instance, provide individuals with visible alternatives to traditional views. We also influence ideas about gender as we interact casually with friends. When one woman encourages another to be more assertive and to confront her supervisor about inequitable treatment, she may instigate change

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TRANSGENDER ACTIVISM ON CAMPUS

If Luke Woodward, a student at Brown University, had written a paper entitled "What I Did Last Summer" in 2003, he would have written that he had surgery to minimize the breasts that were incompatible with his self-identity as a man. Meanwhile, Paige Kruza, who attends Wesleyan University, is biologically female but does not identify as female. Paige prefers that people use transgender pronouns such as *ze* instead of *he* or *she* to refer to Paige (Bernstein, 2004). And Mykell Miller, a student at Northwestern who is biologically female but identifies as male, claims that not all men were born with male bodies (Rosenberg, 2007).

Recognition of transgendered and transsexed people calls for some changes. In 2003, students at Smith College voted to eliminate female pronouns in the student constitution because some students who were biologically female did not identify as female. At Wesleyan, members of what had been the Women's Rugby team voted to delete the word *Women's* from its name so that students who are biologically female but who do not identify as female could be comfortable wearing the team sweatshirts. Wesleyan's student health services has replaced the boxes "M" and "F" that students once checked with the request, "Describe your gender identity history" (Bernstein, 2004). Major companies such as IBM provide transgender medical care, and 25% of the Fortune 500 companies have policies protecting transgendered employees from discrimination (Rosenberg, 2007).

in what her friend sees as appropriate behavior for women. Similarly, when one man tells another that time with his family is a top priority, his friend has to rethink, and perhaps change, his own views of men's roles. When one person announces that she or he is transgendered, that person may make it easier for others whose sex or gender identity doesn't fit neatly into existing social categories. As these examples indicate, there is a reciprocal relationship between communication and cultural views of gender: Each influences the other to continuously uphold or remake the meanings of masculinity and femininity.

A good example of the way we remake the meaning of gender is the concept of **androgyny**. In the 1970s, researchers coined the word *androgyny* by combining the Greek word *aner* or *andros*, which means "man," and the Greek word *gynē*, which means "woman." As you may know, androgynous individuals embody qualities that Western culture considers both feminine and masculine. For example, androgynous women and men are both nurturing and assertive, both strong and sensitive. Many of us don't want to be

restricted to the social prescriptions of a single gender, and we cultivate both masculine and feminine qualities in ourselves. As Miguel points out in his commentary, there is value in the full range of human qualities—those the culture labels feminine and those it labels masculine.

To realize the arbitrariness of the meanings of gender, we need only consider varying ways different cultures define masculinity and femininity. Many years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead (1935/1968) reported three distinct gender patterns in the New Guinea societies she studied. Among Arapesh people, both women and men conformed closely to what we consider feminine behavior. Both were passive, peaceful, and deferential, and both nurtured others, especially young children. The Mundugumor tribe socialized both women and men to be aggressive, independent, and competitive. Mothers were not nurturant and spent very little time with newborn babies, weaning them early instead. Within the Tchambuli society, genders were the reverse of current ones in America: Women were domineering

Bob

What I always thought was unfair in my family was the way my folks responded to failures my sisters and I had. Like once my sister Maryellen tried out for cheerleader, and she wasn't picked. So she was crying and upset, and Mom was telling her that it was okay and that she was a good person, and everyone knew that and that winning wasn't everything. And when Dad came home he said the same things—telling her she was okay even if she wasn't picked. But when I didn't make the junior varsity football team, Dad went bonkers! He asked me what had gone wrong. I told him nothing, that other guys were just better than I had been. But he'd have none of that. He told me I couldn't give up and had to work harder, and he expected me to make the team next season. He even offered to hire a coach for me. It just wasn't okay for me not to succeed.

and sexually aggressive, whereas men were considered delicate and taught to wear decorative clothes and curl their hair so they would be attractive to women.

Body ideals for women provide another example of the constructed and arbitrary character of gender. Currently, Western culture regards thinness as desirable in women, particularly Caucasian women. Yet in the 1950s, fuller-figured women such as Marilyn Monroe exemplified femininity and sexiness. Even today, some cultures regard heavier women as particularly beautiful and desirable. For example, in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (sub-Saharan Africa), young girls are often overfed—even force-fed in some cases—so that they become obese and thereby serve as a living symbol of their family's wealth and status (LaFraniere, 2007).

Some cultures view a person's gender as changeable, so someone born male may choose to live and be regarded as female and vice versa. In other societies, notably some Native American groups, more than two genders are recognized and celebrated (Brown, 1997; Nanda, 2004). Individuals who have qualities of multiple genders are highly esteemed. In the United States, gender varies across racial-ethnic groups. In general, African-American women are more assertive than European-American women, and African-American men tend to be more communal than white men (Rothenberg, Schafhausen, & Schneider, 2000; V. Smith, 1998).

Even within a single culture or social group, the meaning of gender varies over time. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, family and work were intertwined for most people. Thus, men and women worked together to raise crops or run businesses, and both were involved in homemaking and child rearing. Affection and expressiveness were considered normal in men as well as in women (Degler, 1980); industry and strength were attractive in women just as they were in men (Cancian, 1989; Douglas, 1977). The Industrial Revolution gave rise to factories and to paid labor outside the home as a primary way of making a living.

With this came a division of life into separate spheres of work and home. As men took jobs outside the home, women increasingly assumed responsibility for family life. Consequently, femininity was redefined as nurturing, depending on men for income, focusing on relationships, and making a good home. Masculinity was also redefined as being emotionally reserved, ambitious, and successful at work, and—especially—earning a good income (Cancian, 1989; Risman & Godwin, 2001). In her commentary, Emma, a 58-year-old, part-time student, reflects on changes in how women see themselves.

Changing views of gender as well as sex are also evident in the increasing recognition of individuals who don't fit conventional definitions of male or

Miguel

I like to be strong and to stand up for myself and what I think, but I would not want to be only that. I am also sensitive to other people and how they feel. There are times to be hard and times to be softer; there are times to be strong and times to let others be strong.

female, masculine or feminine. We've already noted that intersexed individuals have biological characteristics of both males and females. In addition, we need to think about transgendered and transsexed individuals. Although not everyone agrees on language and labels, generally **transgendered** is the term for individuals who feel that their biologically assigned sex is inconsistent with their true sexual identity—that they are women, despite having male bodies, or men despite having women's bodies (Howey, 2002; Sheridan, 2001; Stryker, 1997, 1998; Tyre & Scelfo, 2006). Transgendered people often dress and adopt the behaviors of the gender with which they identify. In the movie *Boys Don't Cry*, Hilary Swank gave a compelling portrayal of a transgendered person.

In general, *transsexual* refers to individuals who have had surgery and/or hormonal treatments to make their bodies more closely match the sex with which they identify (Devor, 1997). After surgery, transsexuals may describe themselves as *post-transition males to females* (MTF) or *post-transition females to males* (FTM). For example, Dr. Wally Bacon left his campus in Nebraska in the spring of 2005 and returned in the fall of 2005 as Dr. Meredith Bacon. At the age of 59, Dr. Bacon decided to make the change. Since making that decision, she has had a number of surgeries so that her body conforms to how she understands herself (Wilson, 2005c).

Another MTF transsexual is Deirdre (formerly Donald) McCloskey, a professor of economics. According to her, surgery and hormones changed her sex, but she had to learn gender, had to learn to be feminine. She studied all of the small actions—gestures, facial expressions, postures—that women use and practiced them until they were second nature to her. Reflecting on this, McCloskey (1999) wrote that gender is “an accretion of learned habits, learned so well that they feel like external conditions, merely the way things are. It is a shell made by the snail and then confining it” (pp. 83–84). Because they have experience in being and being seen as more than one sex, transsexuals often gain keen insight into gendered dynamics in cultural life. For example, Ben Barres (2006), a FTM transgendered person wryly commented, “By far the main difference that I have noticed is that people who don't know I am transgendered (female to male) treat me with much more respect. I can even complete a whole sentence without being interrupted by a man” (p. 135).

The commentary by Christine, a post-transition MTF with whom I've corresponded, gives insight into how it felt to her to be accepted as the person she had always felt she was.

Emma

In my day, women were a lot different than they are today. We were quieter, and we put other people ahead of ourselves. We knew our place, and we didn't try to be equal with men. Today's women are very different. Some of the younger women in my classes put their careers ahead of marriage, some don't want children, and many think they should be as much the head of a family as the man. Sometimes, I feel they are all wrong in what they want and how they are, but I have to admit that a part of me envies them the options and opportunities I never had.

Transgendered, transsexed, and intersexed people challenge the idea that sex and gender are dualities—that is, that male and female, masculine and feminine are opposite, stable, and the only two possibilities (Namaste, 2000). Similarly, other cultures' views of sexuality and sexual orientation challenge views prevalent in the United States. For example, the Sambias in Melanesia consider same-sex sexual activity between males a normal part of developing an adult masculine identity (Herdt, 1997). In ancient Greece, older men with status often took young men as lovers; this was considered the ideal, the purest love relationship. In Victorian society, friendships between married women often included sexual intimacies that today we might consider lesbian, but that were seen as a common part of women's friendships (Marcus, 2007).

What gender means also changes over the course of an individual's lifetime (Kimmel, 2003). What it means to be masculine at 10 may be being good at soccer or baseball. At 28, however, most men place high priority on a good job as a measure of their masculinity. Similarly, what a 10-year-old girl considers feminine may be bows in her hair, but a 28-year-old woman may define femininity as bearing and raising children. Such changes are not just because we age personally, but also because the social context in which we live changes over time, and that affects our personal sense of gender identity.

Finally, gender is a relational concept because femininity and masculinity make sense in relation to each other. Our society defines femininity in contrast to masculinity and masculinity as a counterpoint to femininity. As meanings of one gender change, so do meanings of the other. For instance, when social views of masculinity stressed physical strength and endurance, femininity was defined by physical weakness and dependence on men's strengths. Perhaps you've read in older novels about women's fainting spells—the “vapors”—and the smelling salts they kept nearby to revive themselves. With the Industrial Revolution, sheer physical strength was no longer as important to survival, so masculinity was redefined as intellectual ability and success in earning income. Simultaneously, women's business acumen disappeared. In part, this happened because society relied less on physical strength to distinguish between women and men.

Let's summarize this extended discussion of gender. We have noted that gender is the collection of social, symbolic meanings that a society constructs and confers on biological sex. These meanings are communicated through structures and practices that

Christine

Never did I appreciate how so quickly life-changing living as an integrated, authentic self would be. Never in my wildest dreams did I believe that “genetic” women (“gg's” as the community calls them—genetic girls) would so quickly embrace me, invite me into their private world, and want to help me find my place among them. Being accepted as the girl I am has been my dream from age four or five. The latter dream is now becoming a reality. In some ways I'm just now living as a teenager, emotionally and socially.

pervade our daily existence, creating the illusion that there are two and only two sexes, two and only two genders, and the gender prescriptions society embraces are the natural, normal ways for women and men to be. Yet, we've also seen that the meaning of gender varies across cultures and over time in particular cultures, and how we conceive of each gender is related to our views of the other. This reminds us that, even though what our society defines as feminine and masculine may seem natural to us, there is nothing necessary or innate about any particular meaning for gender. By extension, this insight suggests that we have more choice than we sometimes realize in defining sex and gender for ourselves and one another.

CULTURE

A **culture** is made up of structures, primarily institutions, and practices that reflect and uphold a particular social order. They do this by defining certain social groups, values, expectations, meanings, and patterns of behavior as natural and good and others as unnatural, bad, or wrong. Because gender is central to cultural life, society's views of gender are reflected in and promoted by a range of social structures and practices.

One of the primary practices that structures society is communication. We are surrounded by communication that announces social views of gender and seeks to persuade us that these are natural, correct ways for men and women to be and to behave. We open a magazine and see a beautiful, thin woman waiting on a man who looks successful and in charge; we turn on our television and watch a prime-time program in which a husband tells of a big business triumph while his wife prepares dinner; the commercials interspersed in the show depict women cleaning toilet bowls and kitchen floors and men going for the gusto after a pickup basketball game; we meet with a group of people on a volunteer project, and one of the men assumes leadership; we check out a new videogame and don't even notice that it, like many videogames, includes women characters who are prostitutes and are supposed to be abused by game players; a working woman receives maternity leave, but her husband cannot get paternity leave. Each of these practices communicates our society's views of gender.

Consider additional examples of cultural practices that uphold Western views of gender. Although no longer universal, the custom whereby a woman gives up her name and takes her husband's on marriage still prevails (Suter, 2004). It carries the message that a woman is defined by her relationship to a man but a man is not equivalently defined by his relationship with a woman. Within families, too, numerous practices reinforce

Blair

I don't think I could accept it if someone I knew changed their sex. I don't think you can do that medically. I mean if there was a medical procedure to change skin color and I became black, would I be a black? Would other blacks accept me as black? I don't think so.

social views of gender. Parents routinely allow sons greater freedom and behavioral latitude than they grant daughters, a practice that encourages males to be more independent. Daughters, much more than sons, are taught to do housework and care for younger siblings, thus reinforcing the idea that women are supposed to be concerned with home and family.

Another institution that upholds gender ideology is the judicial system. Until recently, a wife could not sue her husband for rape, because intercourse was regarded as a husband's right. Men's parental rights are abridged by judicial views of women as the primary caretakers of children, views that are expressed in the presumption that women should have custody of children if divorce occurs. Thus, it is difficult for a father to gain child custody even when he might be the better parent or might be in a better situation to raise children.

In many respects Western culture, as well as many other cultures, is **patriarchal**. The word patriarchy means "rule by the fathers." In a patriarchal culture, the ideology, structures, and practices were created by men. Because America was defined by men, historically it reflected the perspectives and priorities of men more than those of women. For example, it would be consistent with men's interests to consider women property, which was the case early in America's life. Similarly, from men's point of view laws against marital rape would not be desirable. Today, some of the patriarchal tendencies and practices of American culture have been tempered.

Through their structures and practices, especially communication practices, societies create and sustain perspectives on what is normal and right for women and men. Because messages that reinforce cultural views of gender pervade our daily lives, most of us seldom pause to reflect on whether they are as natural as they have been made to seem. Like the air we breathe, they so continuously surround us that we tend to take them for granted and don't question them. Learning to reflect on cultural prescriptions for gender (and other matters) empowers you as an individual. It increases your freedom to choose your own courses of action and identity by enlarging your awareness of the arbitrary and not always desirable nature of cultural expectations.

Sean

In high school my closest friend was Megean. Our junior year she tried to kill herself and nobody knew why because she was pretty and popular and smart—the "girl who had everything." Later she told me that she had never felt she was female, that she'd always felt she was a guy and just didn't think she could keep going if she had to live as a girl. If I hadn't been so close to Megean, I would have found it totally weird, but we were close—still are, in fact, although now he's Mark—and what I mainly felt was sad that somebody I loved was so unhappy. He's a much happier person now that he's Mark.