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# The Gender Communication Connection

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# Why We Study Gender Communication



*What are little boys made of, made of?  
What are little boys made of?  
Sticks and snails, and puppy dogs' tails.  
That's what little boys are made of.*

*What are little girls made of, made of?  
What are little girls made of?  
Sugar and spice, and all things nice.  
That's what little girls are made of.*

English Nursery Rhyme, c. 1820

## **After completing this chapter, you will be able to:**

1. Explain the meaning of *doing gender*.
2. Define and distinguish between *communication* and *gendered communication*.
3. Discuss *standpoint theory* and its use in conceptualizing gender.
4. Define and distinguish among the terms *sex*, *gender*, *androgyny*, *sexism*, and *sexual orientation*.
5. Describe the interaction between gender and communication.
6. Identify and explain four principles of gendered communication.

Think about gender's impact on you and those around you. For many, gender and identity are linked inextricably. As we begin our study of gender communication, consider how being a member of your sex makes you feel. What is it about being male or female that you like and dislike? Do you think others of your sex feel otherwise? Could this be because they “see and do gender” differently than you?

We cannot seem to stop “doing gender,” with many, if not all of us doing it most—if not all—of the time.<sup>1</sup> Gendering is a process. Society, sometimes overtly but other times covertly, shapes thoughts and actions, reminding us of what it




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### Through the Years

Consider the extent to which you have revised your personal definitions of gender and opinions relevant to gender issues over time.

To begin, explain what thoughts, if any, you had about gender during your high school years. Then explain what gender means to you today, identifying at least one gender issue that currently concerns or involves you.

How do you account for the sameness or the differences in your thinking about gender through the years? How has your interest in or concern for the issues you identify above changed you or caused you to reconsider what you believe or value? Explain.

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expects—what it considers masculine and feminine.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when we do gender, we are expressing our views regarding what we consider to be “normal” or “natural” for a member of our sex.<sup>3</sup>

Gender also is a product of interaction. We participate in gendering. However, if we are open to change, and if we are willing to challenge those standards and values that limit us from fulfilling our potential, then it is possible for us to free ourselves to act in new ways. Over time, as we revise our beliefs and reshape our behaviors, our personal definitions of gender also will shift and move. Rather than being static, or fixed, we can free them to be fluid and evolve.<sup>4</sup> Where will they take us in the years to come? That’s what we’d like to know.

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## The Gendered World: Where Would You Like to Go from Here?

We are about midway through the second decade of the new millennium. What do you hope for, and what do you expect when it comes to your gendered life? How you answer could influence your life choices. To be sure, discussions about gender likely will continue well into the millennium. Why? Because communication is key in altering attitudes and bringing about change, and much of communication is filtered through a lens that is gendered, raced, and classed.<sup>5</sup> We do not yet live in a post-gender, post-race, or post-class society.<sup>6</sup>

Through history, gender inequity has assumed many forms, with some issues of gender inequality never having been fully addressed. Despite this, progress occurs. We have been witnesses to the first marriages of gays and lesbians, the first woman commander of a space shuttle, the first woman candidate for president of the United States, the first woman CEO of a Dow 30 company, the U.S. Women’s Soccer team attracting over 90,000 fans to the Women’s World Cup finals, and women allowed to serve in combat roles in the armed services.

More of us now accept that knowledge and art ought to be produced not just from a man's point of view, but also from a woman's. We see men taking larger roles in child care, supporting women's sports teams, and serving alongside women in war. In the years ahead, there will likely be many more firsts. Certainly, your generation's children may assume different sex-role behaviors than those you now enact. In addition, if we continue to challenge gender categories, we probably will have even more choices regarding roles believed appropriate for us to fulfill than are currently accepted.<sup>7</sup>

A healthy diversity exists among men and women.<sup>8</sup> Some continue to assert that men and women differ in so many ways, they might as well hail from different planets—the contention of John Gray's now-classic best seller, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Popular culture, however, is not alone in its obsession with differences between the sexes. Since 2000, more than 30,000 scholarly articles on the subject of sex differences have been published.<sup>9</sup>

All of us, regardless of gender, are similar in some ways and different in others, overlapping with each other at different points.<sup>10</sup> Even where we expect to perceive similarities and differences, expectations are not always borne out. On the other hand, the members of all societies participate in the construction of gender differences. We are taught rules and pressured to adhere to different gendered norms. Many of us use these rules and norms as behavioral guides.

How we are gendered also is influenced by social class, race, and ethnicity. These variables intersect, creating great diversity among men and women across cultures, races, and ethnicities, including but not limited to Chinese Americans, Latin Americans, African Americans, and European Americans. In the United States, for example, the day-to-day communicative activities of men and women have become more and more similar over the last few decades, with Judith Lorber, the founding editor of the journal *Gender & Society*, advancing the belief that women and men ought to be socially interchangeable.<sup>11</sup> Others, contending that individuals are individuals, affirm that gender differences are not purely categorical differences but rather are dimensional ones, distinguished by degree along a continuum rather than by category.<sup>12</sup>

There is more than one way to be gendered. In general, men today enact more relational roles than did their fathers. They are more involved as caregivers, home planners, and sounding boards. Today, women enact more task-related roles outside of the home than did their mothers. Like men, they bring home work from the office, and more of them see themselves as personally responsible for their economic health and for the economic stability of their families.

Are there guidelines we can use to help us chart the future? What do you perceive your options to be? Who do you believe should perform which tasks? What limits, if any, should be enforced? As we look for answers to these and other questions, we need to peer through a lens unobstructed by gendered traditions. We need to work to discard any distorted views of men and women that deny us our full physical

## Instant Recall

### Changes in Day-to-Day Communicative Activities of Men and Women

#### Gender Changes in Men

- Taking on more relational roles
- Participating in caregiving activities
- Participating in home-planning activities
- Functioning as a sounding board

#### Gender Changes in Women

- Taking on more task-related roles outside of the home
- Bringing office work home
- Increasingly responsible for economic well-being of family

and emotional potential. We need to understand that there are many ways to be a man and many ways to be a woman. In fact, what is judged proper or expected for a man or a woman might well be an unanswerable question. If anything, when it comes to responding to such a question, each of us should be free to give our own answer. No response should be viewed as absolute or unequivocal. Of course, it hasn't always been this way.

### ***This Is His- and Her-Story***

Without question, men's and women's lives have changed through time with a number of historical and cultural events leading us to where we are now.

History finds women having once been denied a voice; they were disenfranchised and not necessarily afforded educational opportunities equal to those of men. In years past, there was even a time when women were perceived to be the property of men. Women fought for the right to vote, fought for job opportunities, and fought to enjoy privileges equal to those of men.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout U.S. history, men have benefited from a patriarchal society. Over time, however, the women's movement challenged traditional perceptions of the male gender role. As a result, men—like women—have had their collective consciousness raised. Like women with children, men with children now are afforded opportunities to reconsider sex roles and to choose whether to be the provider or the emotional caregiver, to work or to stay at home with the kids.<sup>14</sup>

So whether we are calling for equal rights, arguing for fathers' rights, reproductive rights, gay and lesbian rights, or job rights, it is by looking at the past that we are better able to understand our present and develop dreams about the future. By understanding yesteryear's events and by challenging existing assumptions about gender, we can pave the way for change.<sup>15</sup>

## ***Exploring Gender Today***

Ask yourself the following two questions:

1. “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?”
2. “Why can’t a man be more like a woman?”

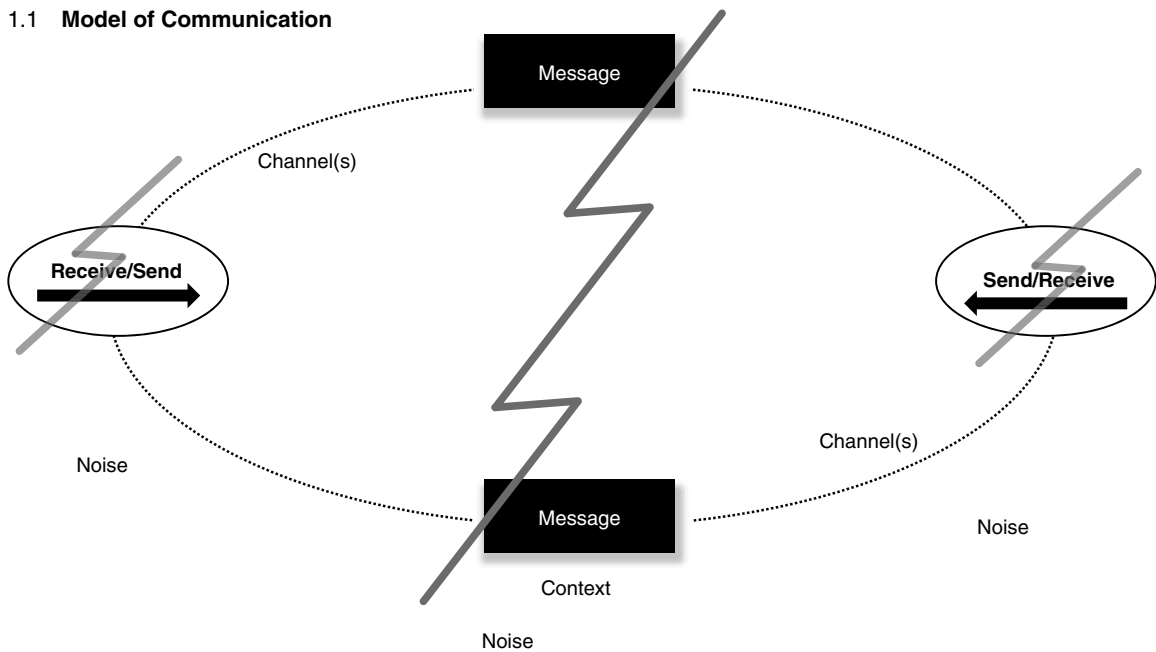
How you respond to these questions suggests a great deal about your cultural background, values, and sexual orientation. In fact, your answers are a reflection of your life experiences. They imply a sense of identity and reveal your point of view regarding gender’s influence.

Both general communication and gendered communication play roles in our life. **Communication** is at the core of our humanness. It links us with other human beings, and it is the tool we rely on to establish connections or relationships. While there are well over 100 published definitions of communication, for the purposes of this book, we define communication as the deliberate or accidental transfer of meaning, occurring whenever someone observes or experiences behavior and attributes meaning or significance to that behavior.<sup>16</sup> Communication is also a process, “a continuous stream in which everything is simultaneously a reaction and an instigation, an instigation and a reaction.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, communication is ongoing and ever moving forward. It is virtually impossible to determine when it starts and stops. It is forever changing and cannot be frozen in time.

When we communicate, we send and receive messages simultaneously through multiple channels. Thus, communication is also a concurrent exchange of influences. Whenever we communicate with another person, we receive feedback, or verbal and nonverbal cues we perceive in reaction to our communication. Communication occurs within a context encompassing not only the physical and temporal environment but also the other people present together with their cultural backgrounds. In the context of communication, noise functions as a communication limiter, interfering with or distorting our ability to send or receive messages. Noise has both internal (personal or psychological) and external (environmental) sources. Communication also exerts its own effects, sometimes sought and sometimes unintended. The following model illustrates communication as a simultaneous transaction (see Figure 1.1).

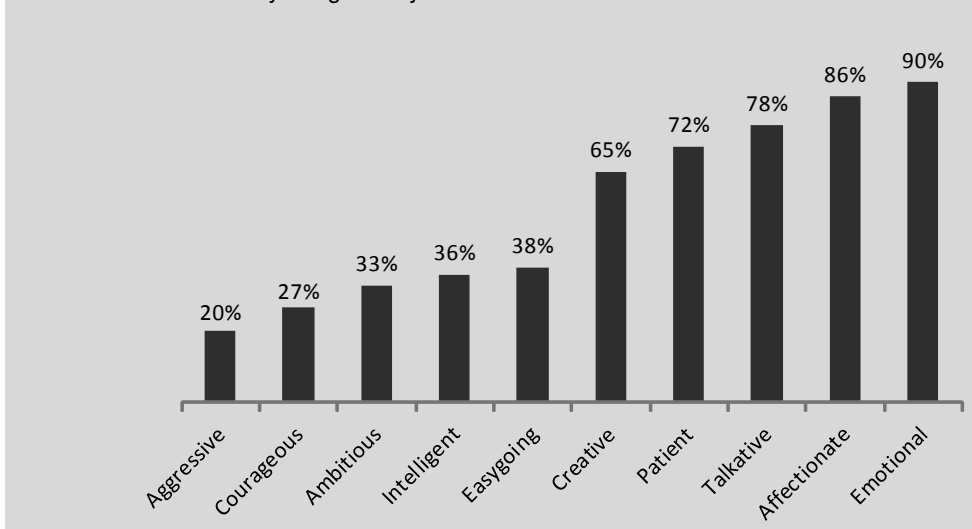
Communication becomes **gendered communication** when your sex or gender influences your relationships—whether those relationships are with persons of the same sex as you or members of the opposite sex. As the nursery rhyme at this chapter’s beginning indicates, the fact that you are a male or a female may well make a difference in how people communicate with you and how you communicate with them, affecting not only *what* you say to others but also *how* you say it. We perceive each other through gendered eyes, expecting others to behave in certain ways simply because of their sex, with the values and prescriptions that culture assigns to gender affecting our personal, social, and professional lives (see Figure 1.2).<sup>18</sup>

## 1.1 Model of Communication



## 1.2 Female Stereotypes

Characteristics adults say are generally more true of women:



While the nursery rhyme we used at this chapter's opening polarizes the sexes, in this book we explore the similarities as well as the differences between us. Gender was once thought of as fixed and enduring, but an increasing number of families have a member who is trans-identified—and transitioning from one sex to another.

## Instant Recall

### Thinking About Our Gendered World

- Gender is part of identity.
- How we are gendered depends upon social class, race, and ethnicity.
- There are many ways to be a man or a woman.
- Communication becomes gendered when sex or gender influences a relationship.

In fact, the word *transsexual* describes those who feel their body is not an adequate reflection of their gender identity.<sup>19</sup> Of note, the eleventh season of the CW television network show *America's Next Top Model* featured a transsexual contestant.

If we learn how people both like and unlike ourselves perceive and are affected by gender, work earnestly to comprehend how gender frees us in some ways while limiting us in others, and choose not to be constrained by those who fear or are frustrated by change, our life choices and possibilities broaden.

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## Conceptual and Perceptual Foundations

Every individual is unique. We have different viewpoints and approach life from different standpoints. **Standpoint theory** informs us that our culture defines people by gender, race, and class, and that a person's location within the culture shapes his or her life, affecting perceptions of experience, the processing of knowledge, and views of the future. Because persons in positions of power have an overriding interest in preserving their place in the hierarchy, they tend to develop more distorted views of social life than do persons who gain nothing from their position in the culture. In contrast, persons belonging to a culture less powerful, or to a group that is subordinate or marginalized, have been shown to develop keener insights into how society works because they need to develop these understandings to survive.<sup>20</sup> Thus, while the communication of men and women is similar in some situations, it is quite different in others.<sup>21</sup> The experiences of people of color, gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals reveal the unique lessons we learn about gender.

Standpoint theory recognizes both the similarities and the differences among us, providing us with a firm foundation from which to acknowledge our diversity. "Standpoint focuses on perspectives of women, but could also take the perspectives of African American women, poor white women/men, nonwhite women and men,



and individuals belonging to minority ethnic and religious groups outside modern Western society.”<sup>22</sup> Since there is no objective standard for measuring standpoints and no single perspective on social life, a position taken represents a subjective standpoint. The concept of multiple, albeit partial and incomplete truths, is central to standpoint theory: Every social group perceives a partial view of society derived from their experiences.

Because the circumstances of women and men’s lives contrast in key ways, females and males develop distinctive identities, use different perspectives, set different priorities, and develop diverse views of social life, communication, and ways of interacting.<sup>23</sup> Who we are affects our perceptions, influencing what we see and understand. It leads us to personalize our feelings, values, and thinking. It causes us to make choices. For example, because we value equality, we may feel pressured by social expectations and practices and, thus, perceive a need to rebel against inequities based on gender. Or, we may feel relieved by the benefits we perceive our gender to bestow upon us, finding ourselves rewarded by a social system that unequally appreciates and values men and women.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of whether you feel privileged or paralyzed, empowered or disadvantaged by the social evaluations of others, studying how gender influences communication can make a difference in your life. According to Lorber, the task we face is to move beyond dichotomy and undermine the very basis of gender stratification—that “ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories.”<sup>25</sup>

## ***Distinguishing Sex and Gender***

We need to define five key terms: *sex*, *gender*, *androgyny*, *sexism*, and *sexual orientation*. Although the first two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they have different meanings.

**Sex** is a descriptor of the genetic/biological composition or code of an individual and, as such, accounts for men and women’s biological differences. People do not acquire sex. It is innate; they are born with it. Usually a pair of chromosomes determines your sex: If female, you likely have XX sex chromosomes; if male, probably XY sex chromosomes. Occasionally, children we call hermaphrodites—or, more preferably, **intersexed**—are born with biological characteristics of both the sexes, possessing ambiguous genitals.

**Gender**, while related to one’s biological sex, is also a descriptor of “the psychological, social, and cultural features and characteristics strongly associated with the biological categories of male and female.”<sup>26</sup> Gender is an acquired, learned, or socially constructed notion rather than a biologically constructed one—a human invention that identifies the social, psychological, and cultural differentiations between the sexes.<sup>27</sup> In other words, gender reveals each of us has been socialized in relation to our sex.<sup>28</sup> Thus, gender takes us beyond whether we are anatomically male or female.<sup>29</sup>



### What Sexism Is and Is Not

Provide examples of what you believe sexism is and is not. For example, is it sexist to have separate bathrooms for women and for men? Is it sexist to bar high school girls from boys' football teams if girls' team sports also are offered at the high school?

In your opinion, what role does social, economic, and political power play in sexism? To what extent can persons with no real access to power in our society be sexist? Explain.

We each have qualities or behavioral tendencies that our culture defines as masculine or feminine. How much of each set we exhibit reveals our gender. Gender manifests itself during interaction, varying across cultures. For example, if you were raised in Saudi Arabia or Japan, your beliefs regarding the rights of women and men in society would probably differ from those you would hold if raised in the United States. We should note, however, that we are not just the recipients of culture's gendered messages; we also influence them.

In many cases, sex and gender support one another—many men see themselves as masculine, and many women see themselves as feminine. But sometimes, the opposite is the case, with men expressing their feminine sides and women their masculine sides. We should also point out that the sex and gender of persons who describe themselves as **transgendered** or gender queer is inconsistent, since while these individuals possess the physical characteristics of one sex, they strongly identify with the other. The term *transgendered* (being perceived as neither male nor female) is not to be confused with *transvestitism* (or cross-dressing). Rather, transgendered people move beyond traditional gender boundaries, expressing their gender as they see fit, effectively transcending expectations to construct a form of gender that is their own.<sup>30</sup>

The word **androgyny** is a combination of two Greek words, *andros*, which means “man,” and *gyne*, which means “woman.” Persons who are androgynous reject rigid sex-role categorizations, preferring instead to embody qualities that are both masculine and feminine. Thus, an androgynous woman might be both emotional and forceful. An androgynous man might be both deferential and competitive. Androgynous individuals understand that we have more choice in defining ourselves as males and females than some of us realize. (*Note*: The etymological basis of the word itself asserts the primacy of male even within a term that is supposed to characterize an individual who possesses both feminine and masculine characteristics.)

The word **sexism** conjures up images of discrimination. Sexism occurs when we assign characteristics to others because of their sex; it denotes the unfair, discriminatory, or inappropriate treatment of people based on their sex. While women have been found to be less sexist than men, sexism can pertain to both men and women, and either a man or a woman may be its victim or the victimizer.<sup>31</sup> Women students who are targets of sexism are more apt to confront the person victimizing them if

## Instant Recall

### Sex v. Gender

#### Sex

- Termed as male/female
- A genetic/biological descriptor
- Innate
- Biologically constructed

#### Gender

- Termed as feminine/masculine
- A psychological/social/cultural descriptor
- Acquired
- Learned

they see themselves as feminists, the perpetrator of the sexism was a peer, or the perpetrator made disparaging comments.<sup>32</sup>

Persons who are sexist denigrate the members of one sex in order to exalt members of the other sex, placing a significantly higher value on its members. Examples of sexism include: (1) viewing members of either sex as genetically inferior; (2) supporting discriminatory practices against the members of either sex; or (3) treating the members of either sex as sexual objects. Thus, when we pay women less money than men for doing the same job, do not vote for a candidate solely because of his or her sex, exhibit hostility toward women and men who fail to fulfill traditional sex roles, fail to award a parent custody of a child because of his or her sex, or use women as sex objects in advertising, we display sexism.

**Sexual orientation** is a characteristic referring to the sex of the person(s) to whom an individual is sexually attracted or with whom the individual has sexual relations.<sup>33</sup> (It is no longer viewed as a choice or preference; as Lady Gaga sings, “I was born that way.”) Attitudes and behaviors that support heterosexuality as “normal,” and as more desirable than homosexuality or bisexuality, are **heterosexist**.<sup>34</sup> Labeling a boy as a “sissy” and a girl as a “lesbo” because he or she does not conform to heterosexual expectations is heterosexist.

## Communication Cultures

While we will explore these characteristics in greater depth in later chapters, in general, **feminist communication cultures** tend to accentuate expressive goals, less-structured organizations, collective orientations, and cooperative speech patterns.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, **masculine communication cultures** tend to accentuate instrumental goals, hierarchical structure, individualistic goals, and competitive speech forms.<sup>36</sup>

Both masculine and feminine communication cultures affect the men and women who adhere to their culture’s prescriptions. The directive, “Don’t act like a girl” becomes for many men the primary cornerstone of their manliness.<sup>37</sup> Men find

themselves prompted repeatedly to be aggressive and show what they are made of. In addition, they are expected to be both sexual and self-reliant.<sup>38</sup> Feminine cultures convey very different messages. For example, many women learn that cultural expectations for appearance include being thin, while cultural expectations for behavior require that they be sensitive and caring. It seems that in contrast to men, caring for others is integrally connected with being a woman. We do not mean to draw superficial conclusions about the way that men and women are. The existence of a feminine or masculine communication culture does not mean that all women or all men are perfect representatives of that culture. **Essentializing**—that is, the tendency to reduce the members of either sex to certain essential characteristics—is harmful. All women are not all alike, and neither are all men.

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## Communication and Gender: Which Is the Catalyst?

Gender is a communicative process. We construct and communicate our gender to others, and they construct and communicate their gender to us. Consider these questions:

1. To what extent do you think that the sex of a person provides you with clues about how to communicate with him or her?
2. Do persons of different sexes react differently to the messages you send?
3. Does knowing a person's sex help you predict how that person will respond to you?
4. In your opinion, what are the proper ways for men and women to communicate and interact with each other?

If communication is the essential human connection, then answering the preceding questions by exploring the gendered nature of that connection is worthy of our consideration. Like communication in general, gendered communication may be accidental or intentional. Any time we accidentally or intentionally send a message that was influenced by our gender or the gender of another person, gendered communication occurs. And whether it is done consciously or unconsciously, our use of it precipitates reactions in others.

Because of the gendered messages we perceive others to send, we may work to alter or abandon a particular way of thinking or behaving, or we may work to sustain or enhance a particular way of thinking or behaving. Gendered communication can cause us to become dissatisfied with the way others see and respond to us, or it can cause us to experience satisfaction with our identity and the ways others interact with us.

Communication influences relationships. Gendered communication permeates relationships. How we act or fail to act when in the presence of males and females



### In and Out of *A Doll's House*

Though written a long time ago, the play *A Doll's House*, by nineteenth-century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, draws upon the debate surrounding the role of women in contemporary society. Nora Helmer was a middle-class housewife whose primary duties were as mother and spouse. She was expected to defer to her husband—Torvald Helmer—in every situation, to agree with his ideas, and to do as he wished. On one level, Nora successfully assumed this role and played along as Torvald's obedient wife. On a deeper level, however, her belief in traditional gender roles was less sincere, and she often quietly defied her husband's wishes. Her decision to ignore the laws of society to independently and secretly save her family during a financial crisis attested to her strength of character and ability to make challenging decisions.

Ultimately, Nora recognized the limitations of her marriage and chose to make her exodus. Her fate, however, was not an enviable one: Once she left the security of her family, she was certain to be impeded by social prejudice and society's reluctance to allow women to depart from their traditional roles.

*A Doll's House* is widely considered a feminist play today given Nora's journey from a somewhat oppressive marriage to her eventual independence. While discussing the subject of feminism, Ibsen claimed that he was more of a poet and less of a social philosopher. Ibsen intended *A Doll's House* to be a critique of patriarchal society. He believed that women would initiate a revolt against repressive conventions of society. Unfortunately, critics did not agree with this vision and Ibsen actually was forced to write an alternative ending to his play for German audiences! In the second ending of *A Doll's House*, Nora sees her children and decides not to leave her family. Ibsen called this ending a "barbaric outrage" against the play. What do you think?

1. How do you imagine male and female standpoints coincide or contrast when it comes to interpreting gender-role identities and Nora's actions?
2. Cite an instance in a relationship you or someone you know shared in which differences in the way each person viewed and defined gendered roles caused problems and/or led to a relational turning point.

makes a difference in our collective lives. For men, as an example, the purpose of talk is primarily instrumental—that is, they talk to gain status, exert control, accomplish a goal, or solve a problem. For women, however, the primary purposes of talk are to establish connection and gain intimacy. Gender-differentiated patterns of communication also lead men and women to have different expectations for their interactions and to experience each other in different ways.

An understanding of the standpoints of both men and women is necessary for us to develop a more complete understanding of gender relations. We need to explore relationships between men and women, among men, and among women. Only then will we be able to identify when gender and not some other variable is functioning as a salient force in our lives.

## Instant Recall

### Masculine v. Feminine Communication Cultures

#### Masculine Communication Cultures

- Accentuate instrumental goals
- Support a hierarchical structure
- Tend toward individual orientation
- Foster competitive speech patterns

#### Feminine Communication Cultures

- Accentuate expressive goals
- Support a less formal structure
- Tend toward collective orientation
- Foster cooperative speech patterns

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## The Merging of Communication and Gender

Your views of masculinity and femininity derive from your experiences. More than likely, from the day you were born, important people in your life have communicated to you your culture's gender expectations. They have let you know what is expected from a member of your biological sex. As you matured, you probably became more aware of your feelings about these prescriptions, and you either affirmed their value and validity or you challenged them. Perhaps you questioned their fairness. If you're a woman, you may not have wanted to reroute your career in order to be the primary caregiver for children or elderly parents. If a man, perhaps you would have preferred to be "Mr. Mom," staying at home and caring for your children instead of adhering to a more traditional, linear male career path. (For those who haven't seen it, the popular 1983 film *Mr. Mom* reflected the stereotypes and traditions of the time—a time when dads didn't stay at home.) Perhaps you also observed that people from other cultures handle gender issues differently. Perhaps you realized that your gender did not necessarily have to limit your chosen communication style. You might even have made the effort to expand your options and develop a repertoire of diverse communication styles from which you felt free to choose, based upon whom you were interacting with.

What gender means to you depends upon how your culture defines masculinity and femininity, and to what extent you accept those definitions. All societies promote gender ideologies that specify appropriate gendered behaviors for males and females. In Western culture, newborn boys are generally swaddled in blue blankets, while girls are swaddled in pink ones. As they grow older, boys are usually given trucks or action figures to play with, while girls are given dolls. Even companies target buyers based on gender. For example, Toys "R" Us had different toy sections

in its stores, one labeled “Girl’s World” and another “Boy’s World.” Girl’s World featured plenty of dolls, kitchen toys, and makeup, while Boy’s World featured action figures, trucks, and walkie-talkies.<sup>39</sup> Shouldn’t it be possible and inviting to play without stereotypes? It is. In fact, until children turn three or four, most reveal no gendered toy preferences. It’s once children enter school that the stereotypes pushed by marketers, parents, and peers start to have effects.<sup>40</sup> It doesn’t have to be that way. Most recently, the toy maker Mattel introduced Mega Bloks® and Barbie™ construction sets, while Hasbro introduced an Easy-Bake Oven with masculine colors for boys and a line of Hunger Games crossbows for girls.

When they reach adulthood, males are traditionally expected to play primary breadwinner, while women, whether they work or not, are expected to play primary caregiver. Social practices create different—and inequitable—socially sanctioned opportunities for males and females. The choice of whether to accept or alter a constructed cultural prescription for gender is yours. The changing roles of men and women are inescapable. When you reject a cultural prescription, you still influence it—and may even help to transform it.

### ***Communicating Our Confusion***

Messages regarding gender are not necessarily communicated clearly. And even if they are communicated clearly, not all receivers necessarily accept them. For example, we might believe that we should not judge men or women by appearance. Nevertheless, we may spend hundreds or thousands of dollars a year on beauty and grooming aids and physical conditioning and weight-control regimens, all in an effort to make ourselves more attractive.<sup>41</sup> Or we might believe that men and women should be given equal career opportunities. Yet, when push comes to shove—whether a male or a female—if asked our personal preference, we may find it more comfortable working for a male manager than for a female one. Similarly, while we believe that both sexes should participate equally in the raising of a child, we may still register surprise when a male takes a sabbatical from work to care for a newborn.<sup>42</sup> And while we believe that all jobs should be open to everyone, we may still find it surprising to bring our car to a mechanic only to discover that the mechanic is a woman.

While we may have openly voiced our acceptance regarding the roles men and women should play, we may still be marginal when it comes to how deeply ingrained these more accepting attitudes actually are in our psyche. We may say, for example, that all people are entitled to equal protection under the law, but we may protest against changing the law to allow same-sex marriages in the state in which we live. We may say that all children deserve a secure home life, but we may find it objectionable for same-sex partners to adopt a child. We may still find it more comfortable to base societal privileges on arbitrary but traditional categories such as sexual orientation and sex.

Certainly, there are a large number of gender issues for us to sort out and work through. Our ideas and our attitudes may not be totally in sync yet. While this can



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### "X: A Fabulous Child's Story"

In the short story "X: A Fabulous Child's Story," writer Lois Gould offers a fictional account of a child named X whose parents participate in an experimental study by refusing to reveal the biological sex of their child to anyone. The focus of the story is on how difficult it is for people who do not know the sex of X to interact with "it."

Why do you suppose people had such trouble deciding how to behave in X's presence? In an effort to answer this question, locate and abstract a research study that sheds light on how we use gender information to guide us in interacting with others.

How does what you've discovered also help demonstrate the problems facing gender-ambiguous persons?

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be unsettling, it does make for some intensely interesting discussions. Communication may help create our gendered image, but it is also through communication that we express our gendered identity. For example, we can perform gender in culturally approved ways, or we can live with the consequences of what others might consider inappropriate gender displays. We can participate in the gender system, or we can rebel against parts of it and change our gendered performance accordingly. Through our actions, we can support and go along with the system, we can reveal our gendered confusion to others, or we can imagine and then enact alternatives.<sup>43</sup>

## ***Changing Communication Paradigms***

A **paradigm** is a belief structure. For example, we have beliefs about how men and women should act and the roles they should perform. When we revise our stereotypical way of thinking about men and women, previous boundaries based upon sex give way, and we make paradigm shifts.

Years ago, for example, it was considered terribly inappropriate for a woman to ask a man out on a date, pay her own way, or to pay for the date altogether. Similarly, in decades passed, a man's worth was measured predominantly by his ability to advance in his career, while a woman's was measured primarily by her appearance. While such sex-based stereotypes were once pervasive, rules and standards have changed, with some behavioral standards being relaxed and others totally rejected. Today, women and men more readily shift positions, which leads them to shift paradigms and learn new ways of thinking and communicating in their new respective roles.

Women and men now occupy positions and develop abilities not necessarily socially prescribed for their gender. Women in professional positions, for



example, are likely to become more confident, competitive, and assertive than women in general—and as much so as their male peers—simply because they perform roles that promote the communication of those qualities.<sup>44</sup> When placed in caregiving roles, men similarly become as nurturing, attentive to others, and emotionally responsive as women are perceived to be.<sup>45</sup> As we see, gender is a relational construct and is clarified through interaction. This is also in accordance with standpoint theory, which you will recall posits that men and women learn the rules, meanings, and norms of communication through the activities in which they participate. This suggests that if we participate in new activities, then we will learn new rules. So, gendered behavior is not permanently fixed but can change as individuals find themselves in new situations that allow them to try on new behaviors.

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## More Principles of Gendered Communication

Consider the following additional principles of gendered communication.

### ***Gendered Communication Is Dynamic***

When we say that gendered communication is a **dynamic process**, we mean that communication about and between men and women is ongoing or continuous, as well as unpredictable. The norms, rules, and roles sanctioned by society change with time. Many fathers now assume primary responsibility for child care. Women and men may now sue employers for sexual harassment. Leave policies for working mothers and fathers have become more lenient. Thus, gendered communication is in a constant state of flux. “Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which s/he is the center.”<sup>46</sup> In effect, our present gendered encounters are points of arrival from past encounters and points of departure for future ones.

### ***Gendered Communication Is Systemic***

Gender is relational. We cannot study gender without studying specific persons interacting in specific situations with specific other persons. We cannot understand a couple by looking at only one individual. We cannot understand a child without looking at that child’s family. We cannot understand gender’s effect on communication without looking at its context, the people involved, and the culture within which an interaction occurs. Every ingredient is connected to every other ingredient, making gender **systemic**. All aspects of our communication with others are interactive and interlinked.

## ***Gendered Communication Is Pervasive***

Men and women frequently interact with members of their own sex and with each other. Thus, the likelihood is great that you will regularly exchange ideas and feelings with members of your own sex and with members of the opposite sex. Because of the number of contacts we have with each other, interest continues to grow on how gender affects those interactions. By focusing on social expectations of masculinity and femininity, women and men, and acknowledging how multilayered messages offered by the media, our families, and religion affect our notions of gender, we become more aware of gender's **pervasive** impact on our psychological, interpersonal, and professional lives. For example, when it comes to multilayered messages, how does the New Testament command that wives submit to their husbands resolve itself with the images presented in films and in advertising, or with the commitment made by many women to achieve equality in the workforce and on the home front? Are the majority of our cultural images of women the way men see them, or the way women see themselves? On the flip side, are the majority of our cultural images of men the way women see them, or the way men see themselves?

## ***Gendered Communication Is Learned***

Over time, we learn which gendered behaviors work for us and which do not. Our interaction with others may be impeded if we remain unconscious of or insensitive to the ways in which our gendered messages affect our relationships. Existing gendered prescriptions can limit our communication effectiveness, especially if we fail to confront the experiences of those who reject them or have been hurt by them. We can explore the anger and pain felt by transsexuals, gay men, and lesbians in a society that defines heterosexuality as the norm; we can recognize the frustration some women experience when they realize they earn approximately 70 percent (on average) of what men do for similar work; and we can try to understand the anxiety some men feel toward efforts to change “the system.” We decide whether or not to accept what society has defined as normal and appropriate behavior, and we can challenge those **learned** disparities that limit our opportunities.

### **Instant Recall**

#### **Gender Communication Is**

- Dynamic
- Systemic
- Pervasive
- Learned

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## Reassessing Gender and Communication: Goals and Assumptions, Questions and Quandaries

Among our goals in writing this book is to help promote awareness of how we perceive and enact gender during our personal and professional interactions. By honestly evaluating the effectiveness of gender enactments, we can reassess our positions and open ourselves to the possibility of change.

In addition, we believe that a host of questions are ripe for discussion, including these:

- What is the relationship among communication, culture, and gender?
- Is there a gender gap?
- How do we use communication to express our masculinity and femininity?
- How comfortable are we with alternative images of the sexes?
- To what extent does society define men as superior to women or vice versa?
- To what extent does society define heterosexuality as preferable to lesbian or gay orientations?
- What percentage of workers experience sexual harassment in their jobs?
- What are the social bases for gendered violence?
- How do schools affect the achievement desires and self-esteem of males and females?
- How can communication overcome social and cultural views about gender that limit individual health, growth, and development?

These are some of the questions we explore in depth in the chapters that follow.

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## Chapter Recap

For many of us, gender is an integral part of our identity. The opening chapter of this text offered a definition of gender and explored gender as a communicative process. It also (1) laid the foundation for our consideration of how we learn gender, (2) began the discussion of what happens when men and women communicate, and (3) prompted us to take stock of the extent to which gendered messages influence our lives. In the course of our discussions, a number of key terms in addition to **gender** were defined; these included **sex**, **androgyny**, **sexism**, and **sexual orientation**. We also introduced **standpoint theory**, defined **gendered communication**, and explored how gender and communication interact.

The chapter also set the tone for future chapters by acknowledging the need we all have now and again to change communication paradigms, learn new ways of thinking about and enacting gender, and discover alternative methods of communication.

Throughout this chapter, we've used the Talk It Out boxes to explore an array of gender-related issues. Now that you've talked it out, it is time to complete the Think It Out, Write It Out, and Check It Out Online exercises.



### **Think It Out**

Think about those changes you would most like to see when it comes to experiencing gender in our society. What paradigm shifts, if any, do you believe are called for? Who do you believe would object to such changes and would prefer to preserve the existing paradigm instead? Do you think society would be better off if persons who exhibited masculine or feminine communication styles displayed a style that was more androgynous? Why or why not?



### **Write It Out**

1. Compare the quotation printed on the first page of this chapter with the one printed here from the English novelist Ivy Compton-Burnett:

“There is more difference within the sexes than between them.”

Explain which quotation you believe is more descriptive of relationships between the sexes and why, offering specific reasons for your beliefs.

2. In the chapter, we discussed standpoint theory and how who you are determines where you stand in a culture's pecking order—and, as a result, affects perception. Using the preceding quotations as stimuli, write about your personal standpoint and how it influences the beliefs you hold, the choices you make, the goals you have, and your views of the members of groups other than your own. Explain the ways in which you believe that you have been privileged or disadvantaged by your position in the culture.



### **Check It Out Online**

Some years back, the website Oxygen ([www.Oxygen.com](http://www.Oxygen.com)) set a goal of getting women to go online regularly. Explore this website and a male-centered website of your own choosing. In your opinion, what can men and women gain from logging onto and visiting each site? Which site appears to be more hospitable to members

of the opposite sex? Why? If marketing professor James U. McNeal is correct when he says that “boys will be boys, and girls will be both,” does this mean that women will visit male sites but not vice versa? How effective do you think gender-based marketing is when it comes to websites and how men and women actually use the web?

## Notes

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