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Doing Gender in the 21st Century

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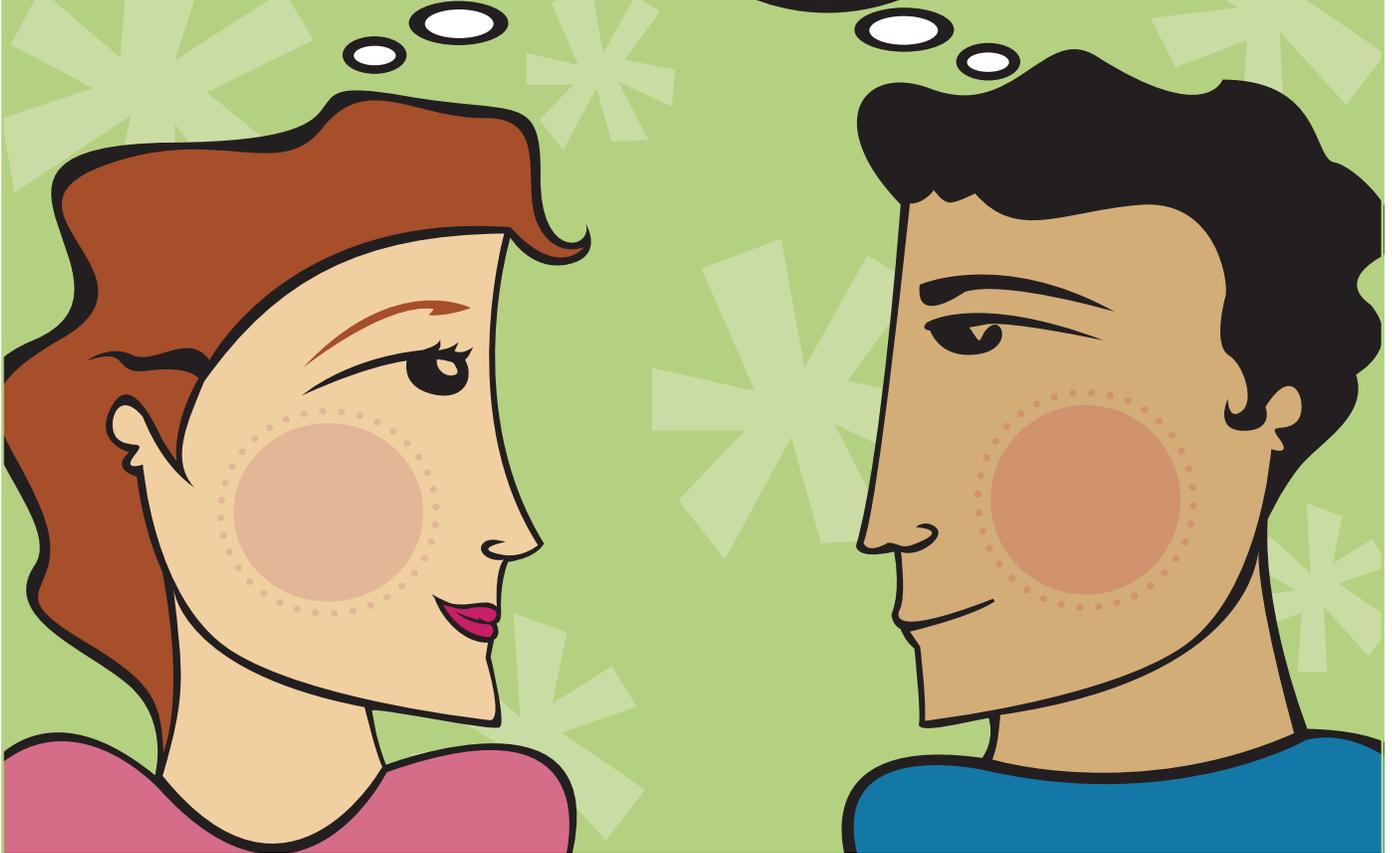
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He Said, She Said:



Doing Gender in the 21st Century

BY TERI KWAL GAMBLE, PH.D.

Does gender still play a role in our lives? Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin would likely answer that question with a resounding "Yes!" There are some who believe that Clinton lost to Barack Obama in the bid to be the Democratic Party's candidate for President because sexism proved to be an even stronger force than racism. Others do not accept this as a valid reason. Some believe that John McCain selected Sarah Palin as his running mate out of a desire to capitalize on the anger felt by Hillary Clinton's former supporters. Others do not accept this as the rationale. Do you believe that gender was a factor, and if so, what role does gender play in your life?

In my mind, once you got married you were a team, and that meant you shared everything: shopping, cooking, cleaning, wage earning and bank accounts.



Think about the implications your gender has for the choices you make and for the assumptions others make about you. How do the attitudes that prevailed about gender in the past compare with the attitudes at work today? What does it really mean “to do gender” in the 21st century, and how are gender and communications connected?

From a conference room to your bedroom, from a classroom to your living room, from the sports field to the farm field, from health care to child-care, the connection between gender and communication makes itself felt. A social creation, and continually evolving, gender is both relational and dynamic. Though we have the power to transform it, it has proven to be a very slippery concept, built into our social structures and personal interactions and influencing the daily realities we face.

How we think about gender is another matter. It can be limiting or limitless, constraining or liberating. We incorporate views about gender into our identity and self-concept, enacting verbal and nonverbal gendered expression styles and revealing what we believe is “normal” for a member of our sex. Of course, over time the issues of concern change and for most of us, so does what we consider “normal.” Certainly, over the course of our lives we have witnessed many gender “firsts.” Men now are expected to take larger roles in child-care, while women are more active in business, politics and sports. The Internet and the workplace have become more female-friendly. Men and women have become co-producers of knowledge and entertainment. Yet, while there are many ways to be a man and a woman, they are not interchangeable, because

gender still influences our personal, social and professional lives — with some spheres fostering more of a masculine and others more of a feminine culture — at least to some extent.

On the following pages, my husband, Michael, and I (both of the Baby Boomer Generation) share some of our thoughts regarding our practice of gender, some taken from our book, *The Gender Communication Connection*. As you read Michael’s and my answers to the questions we pose, ask yourself how your responses might differ from ours and why.

What gendered notions do you accept or reject?

Teri: I have never accepted the notion that a woman’s place is in the home. Even though while I was growing up, my own mother never worked outside the home and was always there when I came home after school, I always knew that I wanted to work full-time when I married and had children. When our son, Matthew, was born, I involuntarily took a year off from work while Michael continued to work. When our second child,

Lindsay, was born, however, I took only eight weeks off, hired a nanny, and returned to my full-time job teaching at CNR.

I have never accepted the idea that the female had to be responsible for “indoor chores” like grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning, or that the male had to be responsible for “outdoor chores” like raking and mowing, as well as primary wage earning. I cringed when female friends remarked that they never wanted to earn more than their husbands earned. In my mind, once you got married you were a team, and that meant you shared everything: shopping, cooking, cleaning, wage earning and bank accounts. I believed a husband and wife should be co-dependents. I did not believe that a wife should be dependent on her husband.

Today I firmly believe that a woman should assert her equality, but many years ago, I did choose to decline a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania so that my husband and I could attend New York University together. At the

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time, I was not fully prepared to demonstrate my independence. Today, I would.

Michael: I remember the day Teri told me that she would never iron my shirts. We were married about one week. I came home from work and there was Teri standing over an ironing board, iron in hand, crying, “This is not what I’m supposed to do. I don’t care if my mother did it for my father and your mother did it for your father — from now on, iron your own shirts!” So we found a good laundry.

I don’t believe that I have ever felt pressured to internalize prevailing social views of gender. I don’t believe that Teri is defined by her relationship to me. Rather, I believe she has an individual identity, as I do. I do believe that too often women are discriminated against because of their sex. When Teri was pregnant with our first child, we were both working for different branches of a university in New York City. The university found itself in the midst of a budget crisis compelling it to “retrench” (fire) professors. Teri was retrenched out of order because she was pregnant, and they believed that she would stop working anyway. That outraged me. We hired an attorney, filed a grievance and won.

I always challenged the notion of the

man as primary income producer. Family life is important to me, too. When our kids were growing up, we were “soccer mom” and “soccer dad,” and our daughter was the committed athlete, not our son.



How does gender influence behavior attribution and the display/reading of nonverbal cues?

Teri: One day, a few years ago, Michael and I went to a popular restaurant to celebrate our anniversary. While we were having a pre-dinner drink, we noticed another couple seated at a table in a corner of the restaurant, also sipping drinks. Michael and I have made a hobby of observing people, so we decided that before ordering dinner, we’d spend a few moments discretely observing the couple’s communication in order to discover the event in their lives that had brought them to dinner. We dubbed them Jane and John Doe.

Jane’s drink was untouched. She sat

forward in her chair, eyes cast downward, lips forming a half-smile. As she spoke to John, one foot, which was crossed tightly behind her other foot, tapped rhythmically, as if signaling her impatience. Her back seemed to stiffen as she leaned across the table. Jane pointed a finger at John, then quickly withdrew it and started tapping the table with it. Suddenly, the tapping ceased. She sat straight in her chair, closed her lips tightly together as if biting them to prevent saying something she didn’t want to say, and turned her head toward the wall avoiding John’s eyes. Then, all at once, she turned toward John, rose from the table and walked quickly from the dining hall. John did not follow her exit with his eyes. This did not appear to me to be a typical celebration. Perhaps, it was a difficult business meeting or negotiation.

Michael: John’s face was impassive, almost expressionless. He leaned back in his chair — slightly withdrawn from the table — with his arms crossed, and shook his head from side to side, closing his eyes as if mulling over a proposal. Then he sipped his drink, grimaced slightly, uncrossed his arms and legs, placed his hand under his chin and stared directly at Jane who averted her gaze. As John began speaking, his eyes narrowed and his neck tightened. Jane suddenly rose, looked directly at him and walked away from the table. Without reacting to her departure, John reached into his jacket pocket, unfolded papers, moved Jane’s plate out of the way and placed the papers on the table. He sat back, re-crossed his arms and waited for her to return.

Teri: Jane reentered the dining room and walked slowly to her table. Before sitting down, she looked intently at the papers now lying where her plate had been. Her face flushed red, her eyes became watery,



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and without saying a word, or making a sound, she turned the papers toward John and slowly sat back down, looking about the saddest I have ever seen anyone look.

Michael: John sat looking smug as Jane approached the table. His eyes searched her face as she looked at the papers. When she turned them back toward him, I think I saw him smile. As Jane took her seat, John signaled the waiter and rose to place the papers back in his jacket. As he refolded the papers, I could read the word DIVORCE. Jane and John were negotiating their divorce and doing it in a place where they would not yell at each other. Their body language told the story.



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How have our expectations for gender changed through the years? Is it possible to re-examine experience objectively, reassess original perceptions, date them and develop new ones?

Teri: I've often thought about the sex-typical and sex-atypical behaviors in which I engage. While I am overly emotional, I don't sew well, and I don't care about cooking. On the other hand, I do enjoy a good argument, and I love to be the center of attention.

I have changed the way I think women ought to act when in the company of men. I used to think that the most effective women were submissive when conversing with men. To me, they would appear to listen patiently to what men had to say, gaze at them with interest, talk less than they did and with their smiles silently applaud what they were being told. It seemed to me that women waited patiently to get a turn to speak — a turn that sometimes never came. That was the prevailing model when I was growing up, and one I thought that I, too, would have to follow. I'm happy to

report that I was wrong.

There is no one set way men and women have to speak or behave. I no longer believe I have to wait for a man to yield me the floor, but neither do I think that I have to become like a man to command the floor.

Michael: Growing up in the South, I developed a number of stereotypes of what northern women were like. I thought they would be louder and more outspoken than southern women, less fickle, more assertive, less sentimental, less concerned with family and more concerned with career.

Did my expectations influence my perceptions? Initially, they did. But, over time, I discovered that northern and southern women weren't that different at all. They just had different styles.

When I was younger, I had expected women to be supportive and respond to my needs. Today, I believe we have to support and respond to each other's needs. Competing and succeeding in work and home life is important to both of us.

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How have our views of friendship evolved?

Teri: Currently, there is a greater possibility of having friends of the opposite sex than existed in generations past. Today's high school and college students go out in groups. When I was growing up most of my friends were females. When my female friends and I went out with guys, we went alone or on double dates. We rarely went out to a movie or dinner in non-coupled groups. While I had the occasional male friend, he was "the exception," and I never had quite the same relationship with him as I would with my female friends.

With my female friends, I shared highs and lows, successes and disappointments. There was no personal or family problem we couldn't or wouldn't discuss. We'd talk about fashion, school, health, relationships, books, movies or TV shows. We were each other's sounding boards and problem solvers.

One memory remains with me to this day. One of my friends had to choose between keeping an appointment to go shopping with me or go out with this guy she had been hoping would ask her out. She chose him. I learned that our friendship took second place to her relationship with him. I've not heard of that

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kind of thing occurring between my daughter and her friends.

Michael: When I was in high school and college in the Midwest, the guys would hang out together at the Hide-Ho drive-in restaurant where we'd meet to decide what to do. We'd spend an inordinate amount of time driving up and down the main street of town. We'd talk about girls, who was dating whom and who wanted to go out with whom. A number of my friends worked on cars, so we'd also spend quite a bit of time talking about the latest in automotives. There weren't any girls that were part of our regular group. Guys came and went from the group.

Several of my friends were interested in electronics. In those days, electronics meant short-wave radio rigs. Sometimes we would go late into the evening talking to people around the world by radio. Today that would be done online.

There was always a football or basketball game that needed players. And invariably we'd find our way to the local field or court where we'd share in a game.

Things sure seemed different for my son when he was growing up. He'd spend almost equal amounts of time with guys and with mixed-sex groups. They'd play tennis, pool and just generally hang around. I'd say today, Matt has as many female friends as male friends. And Lindsay's best friend is a guy she went to high school with, even though she is in a serious relationship with another man.



When thinking about your education, what were the teaching styles and learning experiences you most enjoyed?

Michael: My memories of the midwest high school I attended include images of girls in starched dresses and petticoats, and guys filling elective math and science classes while girls enrolled in home economics and business skills classes such as typing and shorthand. In fact, I recall wanting to take a course in short-



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hand in order to improve my note-taking skills, but being told by my advisor that it was not something boys did. Our advisors saw to it that girls and boys lived up to the prevailing stereotype for course preferences.

On the other hand, most of the girls in my senior class did go on to attend college. At the time, I remember thinking that with more women attending college, their place in society would have to change because they would no longer be content to play the role of homemaker or secretary. I am more aware now of the uniqueness of both my mother and mother-in-law, each of whom not only graduated from college but also went on to attain master's degrees in an era when few expected women to move much beyond high school. I wonder if more women would have followed the route these two women chose if in the high school and college textbooks of the day, space had been devoted to women's contributions in various subject areas. I ask myself if more women would have perceived themselves as able to succeed and affect the course of events if they had

read about female role models who had impacted our lives.

Teri: I went to the Bronx High School of Science in New York City. Probably because of this school's emphasis on math and science, when I attended it had many more men than women. I often wondered why I was admitted to this special school because I didn't think I excelled in either science or math. Sad to say, even when compelled to take a curriculum rich in math and science courses, I found myself concentrating on English, drama and history rather than on subjects which, at the time, I viewed to be more the domain of males.

To the extent that I was able, I made myself invisible in science and math classes and silently observed the males compete with each other in an effort to outperform one another. I still wonder if the reason I acted that way was because of the prevalence of males and dearth of females in my classes. The more I saw the males achieve, the less I expected to be able to match their achievements. I don't believe I would approach my high

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school years the same way if I had the chance to repeat them. While still valuing collaboration, I would also be more competitive today, and more eager to prove myself equally capable.



What themes guided communication in your family? Were they supportive of or at odds with the implicit and explicit sex and gender messages family members sent?

Teri: One of the guiding themes of the Gamble family is “Take on more than you can handle. Then handle it.” Each member of our family has personal responsibilities, a variety of outside interests, and an array of projects that must be completed by designated deadlines.

For example, Matthew is now completing a post-doctoral Fellowship in molecular biology/biochemistry at Cornell, works more than full-time in his research lab, is involved in writing and publishing research papers and attending and presenting at conferences.

Our daughter Lindsay has her MBA, teaches part-time and is a marketing executive for a real estate company. She also is training to run the NYC marathon after having four different knee surgeries — a result of her college soccer career.

I can't help thinking that our kids



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bought into our family theme as a result of watching Michael and me in action. In addition to being full-time college professors and the authors of a number of books, we also serve as communication consultants and participate actively in the life of each of our colleges. We have encouraged both of our children to pursue their interests, and we like to think that their persistence and resilience are a testament to how they have taken our family's theme to heart.

Michael: I believe that a key theme of our family is “Yes I can” is more important than I.Q.” We have always adhered to the premise: *Think you can, think you can't, either way you are right.* To that

end, we enact and encourage our children to enact self-fulfilling prophecies that allow each of us to continually reach higher.

Neither Teri nor I are geniuses. We are hard workers who believe in our abilities to accomplish what we set out to accomplish. Our children are not geniuses. However, they learned that the higher they reached, they more they were stretched. And they reach and stretch themselves to this day.



Lily Tomlin once said, “If I had known what it would be like to have it all, maybe I would have settled for less.” Not the Gambles!

Communications standpoint theory tells us that we should seek to understand how the conditions surrounding men's and women's lives differ from each other. Indeed, there are multiple truths to be gleaned as we come to appreciate how the vantage points of men and women influence their communication and views of the world. I hope that in reading Michael's and my thoughts on the role gender plays in our lives, you will be encouraged to explore why and how you “do gender” in your own.

Teri Kwal Gamble is a Professor of Communication Studies in the CNR Graduate School. Michael Gamble is an adjunct professor in the CNR Graduate School. Both Gambles received their doctorates from New York University. Together, they have written over ten books including, Communication Works, Sales Scripts that Sell and The Gender Communication Connection.



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