The Gender Line

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Gender Separatism

Can you imagine elevating one half of a population and denigrating the other half and producing a population in which everyone is the same? —Catharine A. MacKinnon Feminism Unmodified

In this chapter we will look at the institutions that construct gender. Some are sharply gender divisive; others are more or less harmful to both men and women. Society constructs two separate gender cultures, and the beliefs, social practices, and institutions that separate the sexes disadvantage both females and males. While specific beliefs vary according to a range of factors—ethnicity, race, religion, socioeconomic stratum, and the gendering practices of individuals—the ways culture makes basic divisions between males and females often transcend race, class, and other axes of identity, and cut across most of American society.

The Feedback Loops

One way to test whether separation of the sexes is, in any sense, good or necessary is to ask whether inherent differences exist between them warranting differences in treatment. Recent explorations have probed the biological bases of sex differences. Yet the reporting of much of that research has overlooked the politics of biology. One of the feedback loops in the construction of gender deals with the politicization of biological research. Data concerning the biological basis of sex differences can be steered in important ways: tests can be constructed, often unwittingly, to lead to results that comport with the political philosophy of the researcher, and data about sex differences can be put to use in ways that support particular ideological positions about gender.

The research loop is tilted sharply toward discovering the existence of gender differences. A vast amount of the recent neurological, psychological,
and sociological research and theorizing on biological and cognitive sex differences unsurprisingly emphasizes the differences that do exist between the sexes. Differences research attracts researchers; findings that sex differences exist attract media attention. The first feedback loop is completed: not only does differences research command media attention, it gets published, which fuels the research, which provides the media fodder.

In a second feedback loop, these findings and attention amplify existing stereotypes about gender differences. The empirical research, filtered back to popular audiences through the media, helps construct the ways people think about gender. People begin with preexisting suppositions that sex differences abound and are innate. When new information is received, those perceptions of gendered behavior are exaggerated in ways consistent with sex role stereotypes. The combination of research that is politicized toward finding gender differences and media presentations skewed toward headlining any differences that are found tends to magnify gender differences in popular consciousness.

These feedback loops create a dissonance between the perceptions and the realities or possibilities of gender. This chapter focuses on those disparities. It begins with the highlights of physiological, neurophysiological, academic performance, and psychological research on gender differences. Few true, biologically anchored gender differences exist. Perceptions of innate gender differences far outstrip the testable realities. Thus, the second part of this chapter tries to account for continued perceptions of gender differences, despite the research showing only weak or modest biological correlations. It explores the research and reporting biases that slant interpretations of the data on differences, and thus distort popular perceptions. We will also examine the social backdrop of testing, the cultural milieu in which the tests take place and the tested behaviors are constructed. The third and fourth sections look at why the myths of sharp gender differences persist: the resilience of stereotypes and the relentless cultural practices of gendering that promote the stereotypes.

**Gender Differences: What the Research Shows**

**Physiology**

Of course men and women differ in some aspects of physical makeup: in reproductive functions and, on average, in size, strength, cardiovascular and lung capacity, hemoglobin concentration, balance, flexibility, and percent-
age of body fat. Physical characteristics, though, are enormously variable. Initial differences between the genders in physical attributes, such as strength or body fat, are magnified by cultural factors, such as differences in diet and patterns of exercise. For instance, men generally find more time for physical exercise than women.¹

The significance of the biological differences between the sexes is diminishing. An example of the narrowing gap can be seen in athletics. In several events, such as ultramarathoning, skeet shooting, marathon swimming, and dog sledding, women have surpassed men in recent years.² A 1992 comparison of men’s and women’s running speeds since the turn of the century in middle- to longer-distance running events showed that women’s rates of improvement were double those of men. Exercise physiologists Brian J. Whipp and Susan A. Ward concluded that if these performance trends continue, “these events will be no different for men and women within the first half of the 21st century.”³ Other experts are highly skeptical of this prediction,⁴ but many researchers believe that performance differences would further diminish if cultural variables, such as coaching and resource devotion, were equalized.⁵

Neurophysiology

Few purely structural differences separate men’s and women’s brains. Men’s brains are approximately 10 percent larger than women’s, but men’s body weight is, on average, at least this much more. The frontal lobe in men’s brains, but not women’s, begins to shrink when men are in their twenties. In women, one part of the corpus callosum—the region that functions as a bridge between the left and right hemispheres—is thicker. And since women have more neurons in the portion of the cerebral cortex responsible for language, this could account for greater verbal abilities in some women.

With increasingly sophisticated tools for exploration and measurement, a number of recent studies have centered on innate differences between the sexes in brain composition and function. In 1995 brain researchers reported on their use of magnetic resonance imaging, which measures blood flow, to watch brains of men and women while they performed rhyming tasks and while they rested. A team of Yale University School of Medicine scientists concluded that men and women use different portions of their brains while sorting nonsense words. Women used areas related to language on both the right and left sides of their brains, while men principally used an area of cortex in the left hemisphere.⁶
Other researchers have found evidence that men’s and women’s brains differ in the uses of the limbic center, the portion of the brain associated with emotional behavior. Men demonstrated greater brain activity in the lower region, while women had greater activity in the more highly evolved areas associated with symbolic expression. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania suggest that this may explain why many women are better able to recognize emotions in others, while many men are inclined toward physically aggressive responses.7

In contrast to these findings, a study conducted at Washington University School of Medicine shows that men and women use the same areas of the brain to produce language. Using positron emission tomography to measure cerebral blood flow, neurologists observed test subjects performing word association tasks. Their tests showed that women and men activate the same areas of the prefrontal cortex during speech production.8

It is relatively uncontroversial that there are small structural and functional differences between male and female brains, perhaps contributing to some performance differences on tests of spatial and verbal abilities. Of paramount importance, but usually overlooked, is that similarities between the sexes far outweigh differences: differences between men and women are not as large as differences among members of the same sex.9 Even those scientists who have discovered functional performance differences between the brains of males and females are careful to point out that their research is tentative and suggestive, and that while their research attends to differences, similarities abound: “Fundamentally, the brains of men and women are more similar than different.”10

Academic Performance and Achievement

Popular wisdom has it that males are far better at math than females while females excel at verbal skills. Recent studies challenge this generalization. A 1995 large-scale survey of research regarding sex differences in cognitive abilities shows minor differences in a few indicators. Larry Hedges and Amy Nowell performed secondary analyses on six sets of data collected on national populations between 1960 and 1992. They reviewed the performance of a sample of over seventy-three thousand fifteen-year-olds who took twenty-three different cognitive tests. In another set of data, they looked at the performance of close to twenty-five thousand eighth-grade students who were resurveyed in twelfth grade in a National Educational Longitudinal Study.
Hedges and Nowell observed that “[o]n average, females exhibited a slight tendency to perform better on tests of reading comprehension, perceptual speed, and associative memory, and males exhibited a slight tendency to perform better on tests of mathematics and social studies.”11 Males demonstrated more variability in scoring—larger numbers of males performed at the top and bottom of the distribution on most tests. They did find two more significant differences based on sex: “males are, on average, at a rather profound disadvantage in the performance of [basic writing skills]” and “substantially fewer females than males . . . score in the upper tails of the mathematics and science ability distributions and hence are poised to succeed in the sciences.” Ultimately, however, they concluded that “these data suggest that average sex differences are generally rather small.”

Modern research challenges the popular belief that sweeping differences in abilities exist between the sexes. The broad conclusion that females are verbally superior while males excel mathematically is misleading. “Gender differences appear to account for no more than 1%–5% of the population variance” in verbal, quantitative, and spatial abilities.12 Janet Shibley Hyde and Marcia Linn conducted statistical analyses of the results of 165 prior studies of sex differences in verbal ability, representing the testing of over 1.4 million subjects. They determined that studies finding no statistically significant differences in gender abilities far outweighed those finding that differences exist: “44 (27%) of the 165 studies found females to perform significantly better than males, 109 (66%) found no significant gender difference, and 12 (7%) found males performing significantly better than females.”13

With respect to mathematical abilities, an assembly of data from a hundred different assessments, representing the testing of over 3.9 million subjects, yielded the conclusion that sex differences in performance on tests of quantitative or mathematical abilities were statistically minuscule. In elementary and middle school, girls slightly outperformed boys on computational exercises, and no sex-based differences existed in comprehension of mathematical concepts; “gender differences favoring males in problem solving do not emerge until the high school years.”14

Finally, men and women overall score equally on intelligence tests—“the mean IQ of both [sexes] is 100.”15 Men, however, are overrepresented at both the top and the bottom of the IQ spectrum. Of those scoring in the top 1 percent on IQ tests, seven out of eight are men. Men also represent an almost equally large percentage of the mentally deficient.16
Psychology

Observable behavioral differences between the sexes are more pervasive than measurable physiological differences. Consider a few facts regarding two traits perceived as representative of the gender axes: aggression and nurturing behavior. Boys are approximately seven times more likely to be the perpetrators of violent crime.\(^1\) They are also three times more likely to be its victims.\(^1\) Studies of girls at play show that they consistently demonstrate more nurturant and cooperative behavior than boys.\(^1\) These social facts paint pictures of the gendered lives of boys and girls; they are facts that many people think are explained by biological imperatives.

The belief, supported by some early research in the behavioral sciences, is that boys are hormonally “hardwired” for aggression and physical risk taking because boys have less serotonin and more testosterone than girls. Initial studies in the 1960s and 1970s pointed to a hormonal influence on behavior: that testosterone makes boys aggressive, while estrogen has a calming effect on girls. Several studies have showed that those convicted of violent crimes had higher levels of testosterone than nonviolent offenders.\(^2\)

Modern research questions the causal influence of testosterone in human aggression. A study of 4,462 men from the armed forces showed that while a statistically strong relationship existed between testosterone levels and adult deviance, the relationship was not strong enough to operate as a major determinant of adult deviance.\(^3\) One eleven-year longitudinal study of 178 schoolboys (drawn from an original sample of over 1,100 subjects) in Canada traced their behavior and testosterone levels from kindergarten onward. The study found that socially successful but nonaggressive boys had higher levels of testosterone than their peers who were more physically aggressive. The boys with lower levels of testosterone exhibited more impulsive and fighting behavior; in other words, higher measures on the physical aggression scales were correlated with lower levels of testosterone.\(^4\) This study confirms others that showed that socially successful or winning behavior is associated with a rise in the level of testosterone. Researchers at UCLA studied a group of hypogonadal men who were low in testosterone. They found that testosterone deficiency leads to aggressive behavior, and that after treatment with testosterone replacement therapy, the subjects displayed less anger, irritability, and aggression.\(^5\)

Despite mixed empirical evidence on the relationship between hormones and behavior, the popular perception is that much of the social behavior of the sexes is genetically determined. When any evidence of biolog-
ical impulses is found, it is often talked about both as determinative—that the behavior is hardwired—and as existing prior to or apart from cultural practices of gendering. Social theorists and even legal philosophers seize on folk wisdom to maintain that women are biologically more suited to nurturing and caregiving. In our culture, little girls are given dolls with which to practice caretaking behaviors. Parents also distribute a greater share of child care responsibilities to girls. Cross-cultural studies suggest that both boys and girls who are given caregiving roles as young children develop stronger nurturant abilities.

Stereotypes hold that the innate abilities of men and women differ dramatically, despite a wealth of psychological, sociological, and industrial data that the performance capabilities of women and men, on the whole, are equivalent. Although psychological illnesses afflict genders somewhat differently—women are more likely to suffer from depression than men, while more men are afflicted with schizophrenia, for example—men and women are more similar than different with respect to attitudes toward work, helping behaviors, empathy, general reactions to stress and joy, and other basic behavioral reactions. Regarding “behavior at and attitudes toward work . . . when compared to men, women have been reported to evidence much the same task and interpersonally oriented leadership behaviors, career motivation, need for achievement and need for power, career commitment, and job attitudes.”

Summary
Men and women exhibit some small physiological differences, on average, across populations, but much greater variability when individuals are compared. The statistical correlation between gender and performance on standardized tests and other measures of academic performance and achievement is fairly weak. And, as the next section shows, measurable disparities between boys and girls in academic and standardized test performance have declined over time.

Neurological differences between the sexes may contribute modestly to observed differences in linguistic abilities and aggressive tendencies. Men and women exhibit some fairly stark differences in behaviors, but those behavioral differences have not been empirically linked directly to biological causes. One factor complicating the sex differences discussion is the confusion of correlation for causation. At times the observed behavioral differences of the sexes are mistaken for causal explanations. When boys and girls
are observed to act differently—in choice of toys, affinity for physical roughhousing, or displays of nurturant behavior—it is easy to assume that the explanation lies in biology.

At a minimum, the emerging picture is much more complicated than a direct causal link between basic biological or hormonal differences and behaviors. The evidence of strong biological or physiological influences on behavior is increasingly challenged by modern research. Given the modest empirically demonstrable correlations between biological, physiological, and neurological sex differences and behavior, the question becomes how we should account for observed gender differences.

**Accounting for Difference**

Research and Testing Biases

Some feminist psychologists and sociologists have a political agenda that causes them to ignore empirical research demonstrating statistically significant social and behavioral differences between women and men. Others have biases toward an overemphasis on differences. What is clear is that the issue of empirical research into sex differences is highly politicized.

The research on gender differences may be slanted in ways not immediately visible. Theories about the importance of mother-child interactions in early child development, for example, may have encouraged cultural anthropologists to conduct field studies during times when father-child interactions are less often observed, such as evening hours. The parameters of statistical proof make it much easier to demonstrate differences. As neurologist Steven Petersen says, “It is much more difficult to statistically show similarity, than it is to statistically show a difference. In most cases, this is used to keep investigators intellectually honest, but when adjudicating between questions of difference and similarity, [it] produces a scientific asymmetry.” Bias creeps in at the publication level as well. “Social science research tends to be about looking for differences. Gender researchers nearly always start out by looking for gender differences. . . . When they find similarities, the social science world considers these non-findings. They are not publishable because they are not considered newsworthy; they are not sexy; they are not interesting and nobody really cares.” Negative conclusions simply are not news. One study of publication policies showed that psychology journals “accept more readily reports in which statistically signifi-
cant differences have been recorded, and so it is difficult to publish results in which no significant differences have been found." A selection bias exists for new things, and against proving the null hypothesis.

In science and social science, both submission and publication biases incline researchers toward positive findings and an underreporting of negative results. One study of submission and publication rates of papers in psychotherapy found that “82 percent of studies with positive outcomes led to submission of papers to a journal, while only 43 percent of negative outcomes provoked an attempt at publication. Of papers submitted, 80 percent reporting positive outcomes were accepted for publication, but only 50 percent of papers claiming negative results.” In another less empirical assessment of publication and attention bias, Anne Fausto-Sterling surveyed the reported literature regarding physiological and hormonal influences on gender behavior. While she “does not deny that genuine differences often exist, and in the direction conventionally reported,” she then conducted a different sort of survey: looking at “her colleagues’ file drawers for studies not published, or for negative results published and then ignored.” What she found was that “a great majority report either a smaller and insignificant disparity between sexes, or find no difference at all. When all studies, rather than only those published, are collated, the much-vaunted differences often dissolve into triviality.”

Reporting Biases

The role of the media in shaping gender is both subtle and powerful. Reporters highlight differences that are not supported by real evidence, and seize upon and magnify weak evidence of real difference. The media spin ignores similarities and overplays differences.

Magnetic imaging research by the scientists at Yale and the University of Pennsylvania that showed biological differences relating to gender was given seemingly unlimited airplay in the media. The Yale University study commanded forty-four articles in the popular press, while the University of Pennsylvania results were trumpeted in thirty-five articles. The conclusions of the Washington University neurologists—that men and women use the same areas of the brain to produce speech—were largely ignored. The Washington University study results were reported in only two articles, one in the Fresno Bee, the other in the Sacramento Bee. As Petersen explains, “A study like ours, that points out that basically men and women are pretty damn similar, it’s just not interesting."
Differences are not just overattended, they may also be overblown. Tendencies and probabilities may be misrepresented or misinterpreted as determined behaviors. “Social scientists present results on the basis of statistics and chance and discuss the ‘significance’ of their findings. When these significant differences, often based on small numbers, are reported and repeatedly cited, they get exaggerated and lead to gross generalizations.”

In short, biological explanations are interpreted as more significant than they are, while general tendencies are treated as virtual certainties.

The interpretation of results of biological experiments is thus politicized and given a media headline spin. Headlines announce “Men and Women Truly Don’t Think Alike,” “Could Women Be the Weaker, Fairer, Cleverer Sex?” and “Battle of the Sexes Gets New Weapon.” Many of the stories overgeneralize not only the significance and possible implications of the research, but also the scientific findings themselves. For instance, the summary of a wire story proclaims, “A study of brain use patterns shows what people have long suspected: men are better at math and women are nonviolent.” The headline implies conclusions very different from those suggested by the text of the article, such as the views of neuropsychologist Ruben Gur, the principal author of the brain scan study: “Our findings do not answer the question of whether the differences are genetic or cultural in origin. . . . After all, culture shapes the brain just as the brain shapes culture.”

The manner of journalistic presentation may amplify the misleading results. Fault resides with “a media eager to trumpet breakthrough discoveries in genetic research and unwilling or unable to be skeptical of the ambitious claims sometimes constructed on quite shaky scientific foundations.”

Newspapers and magazines often report results of scientific research in staccato bursts of new information. In addition to overemphasizing individual studies, reporters often focus on singular, positive findings. These may be newsworthy, but not representative of the work in a field. Most media squibs are not think pieces detailing the history of research into sex differences and exploring the larger picture that has evolved over time: “the media tend to report each new study in isolation, as a new breakthrough.”

Maybe the sensationalism can be dismissed, since magazines are just trying to sell issues, journalists are just trying to sell stories, and newspapers are just trying to sell papers. But they also sell “truth”: the reported information becomes popular “knowledge,” and this is how people remember the data. The effect of the headline reporting approach may be that significant numbers of Americans come to believe the deterministic version of events, such
as claims that obesity or the employment prospects for girls or the nurturing capacities or aggressive nature of boys is decided at birth.

Even when reports about sex differences are stripped of overgeneralization and exaggeration, the translation of scientific data into news for popular consumption inevitably involves some reductionism. Reporters must compress pages of scientific research into thirty-second sound bites or seven hundred words of copy. What may be lost is the complexity of causal influences on behavior. The reporting of complex phenomena as the product of single, simple, biologically based mechanisms overlooks the myriad cultural and social influences on personality and behavior and the individual choices people make.

Socialization

Gender does not exist outside culture. Even those modest correlations between sex and neurophysiology or sex and academic performance have no existence independent of their social milieu. Culture is continually manufacturing behaviors. More important, culture denominates behaviors as having genders and assigns values to those behaviors.

Again, the definitional problem intrudes. In discussions of sex-linked behavioral differences, nurturing, caregiving, and mothering often are equated with the biological capacities to become pregnant, give birth, and breastfeed. If nurturing and caregiving behaviors are thought of more broadly as the impulses to be affectionate, protect, educate, be patient, offer security, and solve problems for others, then men suddenly qualify as compassionate caregivers.

Let’s revisit for a moment our paradigm examples of gendered traits: aggression and nurturing behavior. Women are thought to be society’s natural nurturers and caregivers. Some also maintain that men are inherently less capable of nurturing. A confluence of economic and social factors has led to a scarcity of male role models with principal caregiving responsibilities, which perpetuates both the perception and the reality of males as the less nurturing sex. Abundant evidence shows that men are constrained in choosing caregiving occupations and nurturing behaviors as opposed to other jobs and tasks.

Some of the social forces are changing, however. Men increasingly are assuming more caregiving roles. While the sheer number of single fathers remains low relative to that of single mothers—3.2 million compared to 12.2 million—the number has grown 163 percent in the past quarter century.40
The psychosociological research regarding the nurturing potential of men is only of recent vintage. Primate studies and human research testing the “maternal instinct” hypothesis find “no significant differences between males and females in their capacity to nurture.”

Cross-cultural studies tend to confirm that fathering behaviors are culturally and socially contingent, and that in cultures in which mothers and fathers have equal responsibilities as providers and both parents have comparable access to their infants during the day, they share equally in caregiving responsibilities. For example, a study of the Aka Pygmy tribe of hunter-gatherers in Africa involved the observation of a culture in which “men’s and women’s subsistence activities take place in the same geographic locations” and in which each parent was responsible for providing half of the family’s daily nutrition. Researchers concluded that “Aka fathers do more infant caregiving than do fathers in any other human society. Forty-seven percent of the father’s (24 hr) day is spent either holding the infant, or within arm’s reach of the infant.” Of course, in industrialized societies, many fathers may not have the luxury of close infant contact that the Aka father has. But research suggests how crucial nurturing paternal involvement is in child development. “In a study of pre-school-aged youngsters, children whose fathers were responsible for 40–45% of the child-care responsibilities exhibited higher cognitive competence and higher empathy toward their peers.”

Just as nurturing behavior is not a trait belonging exclusively to women, aggression is not solely the province of men. Social evidence indicates that females are becoming more aggressive. A Justice Department study measuring juvenile arrests for 1995 showed that one in four juvenile arrests were of females, which represented a rate for girls growing more than twice as fast as that for boys. While this is not a social fact to applaud, it is indicative of growing societal acceptance of girls and women demonstrating aggressive behaviors. Women are becoming more aggressive as drivers and investors, more socially and financially independent, more ambitious in fighting for equal treatment and better working conditions, more competitive in sports, and more assertive at work, home, sexual relations, recreation, and public speaking. Aggressive behavior on the part of women is gradually ceasing to appear unnatural.

The social explanation for equating maleness and aggression is also abundantly clear. Society considers male aggression natural. Male aggression is promoted when parents are tolerant of little boys working out their differences with physical violence. Violent images are emblazoned on little
boys’ clothes, cartoons, video games, and television, and in their minds. Conversely, the American cultural taboos against female expression of anger are enormous. Boys learn to use aggression as a problem-solving technique, while girls are taught to cooperate.

Consider a comparative study of 160 Israeli and American preschoolers, aged eighteen months to four years. The data showed that preschool girls in Israel are much more likely than American girls to use physical aggression when fighting. The Israeli girls are even more likely, in many instances, than American boys to participate in aggressive encounters. Anthropology professor Carol Lauer says that the cultural message to children in Israel, a country that has been at war with its neighbors for half a century, is that aggression is an acceptable method of handling interactions.

Part of the study concerned an assessment of the different lessons teachers taught boys and girls about the usefulness of aggression: “When interviewed, the Israeli metapelot [house parents] said they did not consider girls to be less aggressive than boys. In one group a metapelet was frequently seen encouraging an 18-month-old girl to assert herself in agonistic encounters. In contrast, in several American groups teachers were seen telling girls that ‘girls do not fight.’” The expectation in America is that little girls will demonstrate caring and nurturant behaviors, and so they do: consistent with socialization patterns, American girls demonstrate less agonistic behavior. Other cross-cultural studies confirm the learned nature of aggressive behaviors.

Consider another example of how the stark numbers seeming to locate behavioral differences in biology may mask competing social explanations. The results of standardized test performance seem to demonstrate that girls have less aptitude for math than boys. Here again, it is easy to mistake the correlation of gender and performance for a causal relationship.

On the SAT (formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test, then Scholastic Assessment Test), girls’ scores, particularly in mathematics, have lagged behind boys’ scores for decades. Based on the new scoring scale used since 1995, out of a possible eight hundred points, girls scored roughly forty-two points lower than boys on math and eleven points lower on verbal between 1980 and 1990. Popular wisdom has it that the first of these performance discrepancies is evidence of boys’ innate superiority in mathematical reasoning abilities.

But in the early 1990s the picture began changing. First, the gender gap in SAT performance narrowed. According to the 1995 and 1996 scores, girls
were thirty-five points behind boys on math and four points behind on verbal. The decrease over time in differentials between the sexes on standardized tests implies that socialization experiences may account for some of the performance differences.

Then the picture gained a social backdrop. Attention began to be paid to the ulterior motives of test designers. The designer of the first version of the SAT in 1925, Carl Brigham, a psychometrician and eugenicist, believed in using intelligence tests to demonstrate the innate intellectual inferiority of blacks and immigrants.\(^{51}\)

Even the modern incarnations of the SAT and its younger sibling, the PSAT, are skewed in gender impact. While men’s SAT test scores, on average, are higher than women’s, women generally receive higher college grades than men. A prospective regression analysis study conducted by two staff members of the Educational Testing Service showed that the SAT consistently underpredicted the performance of women in college math courses.\(^{52}\) What at first may appear to be a gender differential may actually be the result of other demographic variables: “more females than males take the test; the females are disproportionately members of racial and ethnic minority groups; and the females are disproportionately from families with lower incomes and levels of parental education.”\(^{53}\) Finally, on the feedback end of the loop, middle and high school girls may be self-excluding from math classes due to stereotypes they have internalized.

In 1994 the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), a non-profit organization devoted to fairness and accuracy in standardized tests, filed a complaint with the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights. The complaint argued that the Educational Testing Service and the College Board violated Title IX by using the PSAT as the sole screening device for National Merit Scholarships. While girls constitute more than half of the test takers, they receive only 36 percent of the scholarships. According to FairTest, the PSAT systematically underpredicts girls’ performance in college math courses. In late 1996 ETS and the College Board agreed to a settlement with FairTest in which the testing service would attempt to weed out gender bias by adding a multiple-choice section designed to measure writing skills to the PSAT.\(^{54}\) A federal district court in New York similarly invalidated the use of SAT scores alone in the award of college scholarships.\(^{55}\)

The educational testing furor highlights the controversy over measuring differences. When sex differences appear, are they really a function of genetics or something else (prior education, class, income)? When boys and
girls repeatedly received differential scores on seemingly objective tests, are the tests gender-free from the start? And what do the tests measure: mathematical abilities, prior proficiency in signing up for math classes, or aptitude in taking multiple-choice tests? What may appear to be hardwired differences in abilities between the sexes may in fact be an assemblage of embedded biases.

The recognition that culture is teaching differences may go a long way toward explaining observed differences between the sexes on standardized tests. Developmental geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling cautions that the results of sex differences research should not be understood to imply innate differences. Fausto-Sterling lists some of the exogenous variables that may influence the results: parental attitudes may steer boys toward and girls away from mathematics; boys may be socialized in ways that give them more informal mathematics experiences than girls; and teachers’ attitudes in the classroom may gender the learning of reading and mathematics. She reports on an observational study of teachers’ behaviors toward second-graders: “The boys received less direct instruction in reading and more in math. In other words, boys and girls learning together in the same classroom did not receive the same instruction.”

Popular beliefs in—and overgeneralizations about—the biological bases of sex differences may result in differences in treatment of the sexes. This, in turn, may affect performance on standardized tests, such as tests measuring abilities to manipulate objects in three-dimensional space. “Study after study shows people are more physical with baby boys than with baby girls. They throw them in the air, they dangle keys in front of their faces, meanwhile being more protective of baby girls. So why should we be surprised when boys and girls end up behaving differently in response to these gender-specific experiences?”

The Biological Gestalt

The available evidence suggests that there may be some gender-specific biological impulses toward behavior. Of course, biology itself is not fixed; biology is never distinct from social development. Any biological cause is developmentally dependent on external conditions, including nutrition, stimulus, and other aspects of the environment. Cognitive abilities are continually sculpted by the environment. Research finding biological differences between the sexes cannot be disaggregated from the conclusion that environmental influences may shape those biological differences. Evidence
regarding biological or social origins of differences is difficult to sort out because gendered cultural programming begins so early.

Yet even if gendered biological differences exist, we cannot meaningfully separate those differences from our perceptual, research, and reporting biases. Even measurable neurophysiological differences between men and women do not exist independently of testing and journalistic biases. Biology, in one sense, can never be the independent variable, because it is never outside culture. To the extent that differences exist, what do they mean? Biological differences cannot be separated from the cultural process of assigning meaning to the differences.

Research into differences—between genders, races, or populations on any basis—is a politically sensitive area. Overaggressive claims about structural or performance differences may be used to make unjustified arguments about innate intelligence. Just as *The Bell Curve* attempted to resurrect myths that people of color are less intelligent, so have differences in brain size been used to argue that men are smarter than women. Of course, beliefs in differences do not necessarily lead to claims of genetic determinism or imply racism or the superiority of any population. But the extreme version of the argument is one that demands reckoning. The danger is that a focus on differences can lead to a reification of differences and to beliefs that qualities that may result from some degree of biological influence are socially inalterable.

Across time and cultures, people in power have used biological measures to devalue the worth of disempowered groups. History offers countless examples. Beliefs in black inferiority provided a major justification for slavery in the United States and for British colonization of Africa. After World War I, intelligence testing led to the labeling of Jewish and Italian immigrants at Ellis Island as “feebleminded.” Eugenics movements resulted in compulsory sterilizations in the United States and unspeakable horrors in Germany.

In 1861 French anthropologist Paul Broca conducted a study in which he weighed the brains of 292 male and 140 female cadavers, and calculated that the males’ brains weighed, on average, 1,325 grams, while the females’ brains averaged 1,144 grams. Broca concluded, “[W]e must not forget that women are, on the average, a little less intelligent than men, a difference which we should not exaggerate but which is, nonetheless, real. We are therefore permitted to suppose that the relatively small size of the female brain depends in part upon her physical inferiority and in part upon her intellectual inferiority.”58
Little more than a century ago, influential social psychologist Gustave Le Bon used Broca’s data to argue against allowing women access to higher education, remarking that women’s “brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains... [Women] represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and ... are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man. They excel in fickleness, inconstancy, absence of thought and logic, and incapacity to reason.”

These resurgent patterns of locating explanations for class or race or gender differences in the biological exhibit a search for constants, for fixed differences. They also reflect a very broad cultural belief in simple, ultimate causes. The first part of the message is that differences are inevitable. The second part is that biology plays an enormous role in determining human behavior. It is easy to commit a heuristic error when interpreting evidence of biological and environmental influences: “[o]ne of the major ... ideological weapons used to convince people that their position in society is fixed and unchangeable and, indeed, fair is the constant confusion between inherited and unchangeable.” People may assume that if differences are even partly innate in origin, behaviors relating to those differences are not changeable.

The confusion of biological origins with inevitable social consequences is more than an academic error. Implications for public policy often follow insidiously from the location of differences in biological causes. A focus on biological causes may implicitly dismiss the need to search for cultural or institutional causes of disadvantage. At the extreme, the theory of biological origins may be transformed into arguments about biological necessity. The danger, of course, is that biological explanations can be used to justify discriminatory practices.

A friend of mine, Bob, tells a story of how he and his wife shared a common driveway with their next-door neighbors, a family of four. The father, Tom, was a truck driver. Bob and Tom would talk about Tom’s work pretty regularly. Bob once asked Tom why there weren’t more women truck drivers. Tom thought about it for a minute, then said, with great assurance, “They couldn’t shift gears.” “They’re not strong enough?” Bob asked. “No, not tall enough; you have to be pretty decent-sized to reach the pedals.” That might have been the end of it, Bob said, if he hadn’t been reading about feminist theory. But he had, so he asked the question, “But Tom, do they have to build the cabs that way? Couldn’t they build ’em so shorter folks could reach the pedals?” “Yeah,” Tom shrugged, “I guess they could.” He thought for a second. “But I’ll tell you what; no woman would ever want to use a truck
stop.” It is indeed a challenging project: trying to imagine a feminized truck stop. (But not impossible.)

Beliefs in biological determinism may be used to structure social practices that reinforce the traditional division of labor between the sexes. Law professor Richard Epstein argues that biological constraints on behavior are “quite strong.” From this, he encourages a “specialization of roles within marriage that allow both husbands and wives to use their talents to the fullest.” Epstein concludes flatly that “[a]n insistence on identity of roles within marriage would require each party to do tasks that the other can do better.” While Epstein does not spell out what these biologically imbued talents are, presumably he means that men are innately “better” at fixing cars, while women are innately “better” at cooking or housecleaning.

The notion of biologically determined roles has undergirded legal arguments about allowing women to fight in combat, and echoes older custody decisions recognizing a maternal preference. And the idea of genetic determinism is used as an argument against affirmative action. According to this view, affirmative action will never achieve its desired results because of the biological inferiority of women.

The idea of biological determinism has tremendous ideological appeal. It can reassure men and women that the entrenched inequalities of power, child care responsibilities, and wages are appropriate. If behavior originates with biological differences between the sexes, people will tend to believe that the traditional social roles are natural, right, and unchangeable. We simply have not escaped the notion that both men and women possess immutable biological characteristics that determine their appropriateness for certain roles and inappropriateness for others.

The Persistence of Stereotypes

Even with what we know about the biological basis for differences, we perpetuate stereotypes of typically masculine and feminine behaviors, and those stereotypes become self-fulfilling. The statistical support for pure biological differences is weak, since every measure of biology implicates culture—in construction, testing, and interpretation. Given that, it is remarkable that stereotypes about masculine and feminine instincts, traits, and natures persist. This section uses research from cognitive psychology to explain why the stereotypes continue even though they have little empirical support. The following section demonstrates the persistence of cultural
practices of gendering despite what we know about real differences. To-
gether, they show how the cognitive errors are reinforced daily through pre-
vailing practices of thought and social interaction.

Popular Beliefs about Gender Differences

National and international public opinion polls indicate substantial ac-
ceptance of gender stereotypes. A 1996 international Gallup poll revealed
that “[i]n every country surveyed, respondents—whether male or female—
were more likely to describe women as emotional, as talkative and as affec-
tionate.”63 According to this poll, only 6 percent of respondents thought
that being affectionate was a male trait. Cultural ideas about appropriate
gender roles are readily internalized. In a 1995 study designed by the Fami-
lies and Work Institute and conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, 88
percent of the women surveyed believed it was their primary responsibility
to take care of their family.

Traditional gender roles come with a hierarchy. The customary practices
of gender are embedded with notions of female inferiority: “According to
recent public opinion polls, a majority of Americans believe that most men
think they are ‘better’ than women. . . . About half of surveyed women also
consider women inferior for certain occupations ranging from airline pilot
to combat soldier.”64 These popular beliefs about appropriate roles are un-
mistakably influenced by perceptions of gender characteristics as innate in
origin: “About a third of surveyed adults view masculine and feminine char-
acteristics as biologically based, and an equal percentage of women express
support for traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker roles.”65

Gender research, popularized by the media, ultimately finds a home in
the public consciousness. The public mind readily acknowledges the idea
that gendered behavior is biological in origin and unthinkingly accepts that
biological attributes are tantamount to social destiny.

Are the Stereotypes Accurate?

An important question is whether gender stereotypes correctly reflect
modern realities. Some psychologists have demonstrated that gender
stereotypes are generally accurate reflections of observed male and female
behaviors.66 Others who have compared actual behaviors with self-reports
suggest that “people are not very accurate in stating the differences between
the genders: they often overestimate differences and sometimes underesti-
mate them.” While the evidence is mixed, a variety of researchers believe that public perceptions overstate gender differences and that gender stereotypes, while reflecting reality, exaggerate differences in important ways.

Stereotypes possess a self-reinforcing quality. They help construct a world in which people think both in generalities and in fixed ways. First, stereotypes themselves perpetuate archaic ideas about the competencies of women and men, and in so doing, they limit gender possibilities. When stereotypic notions of gender abilities and roles persist despite evidence to the contrary, decisions in important arenas such as education, employment, politics, and the home may be based on outmoded concepts of appropriate roles. Stereotypes also depersonalize by encouraging class-based generalizations that may have little to do with the qualities or aptitudes of a particular individual. When stereotypic thinking about gender occurs, the culture accepts a standard mental picture, repeated without modification and admitting of no individual variations. Finally, stereotypes may be transmitted generationally. When children start forming their own identities and attitudes about gender, they look to peers, the media, and their parents. A study at Tel Aviv University discovered that the “traditionality of the mother’s occupations correlated significantly with the traditionality of the interests of both boys and girls.” If stereotypes are inaccurate and outdated, it is not only the treatment of people in the present that suffers, but also the process of shaping the gender of future generations.

Why Stereotypes Outlive Their Usefulness

Research regarding social stereotypes indicates why they persist in the face of information to the contrary. People routinely utilize cognitive schema to process information: “We tend to view all of those within a social category as the same—their perceived similarities are exaggerated and their differences and variability are downplayed or ignored altogether.” We tend to generalize about sex-based behavior, if only as a simplifying device or heuristic. People use cognitive shortcuts to efficiently process a complex amount and variety of information. And sex is one of a few personal characteristics that are visually determinable in an instant with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

When people process information—including data about the role played by genetics in shaping behavior—they tend to distort risks and probabilities, through use of common sense reasoning and an overreliance on personal experiences. Individuals may weigh their own experiences (“My son
mowed down the Cabbage Patch dolls to reach the trucks”) as heavily repre-
resentative of an issue. Others may give undue emphasis to available infor-
mation or to a particularly vivid example they recollect—such as a single ar-
ticle probing genetic causes of behavior.71

Biases in perception, memory, and interpretation all tend to reinforce stereotyped as against data that would upset the stereotype:

Once stereotypes take hold, other information inconsistent with the stereo-
type is ignored or excluded from consideration or is interpreted in a way that
is consistent with the stereotype. . . . Stereotypes are also maintained by the
way in which individual actions are interpreted. When the same behavior is
performed by members of different social groups, its implications are seen
differently. Thus, the same critical remark was found to be abrasive coming
from a woman, but incisive and direct coming from a man.72

In addition, many of the studies regarding gender differences feed into prejudices and insecurities we all have. Of course this could be an example of weighing one’s own experiences too heavily, but during the time I was re-
searching the material for this chapter, I came across an article in Science
suggesting that consistency in hand preference over time in twelve- to forty-
two-month-old children was indicative of precocious intellectual develop-
ment for females but not males. Having an eighteen-month-old daughter at
home who has exhibited a distinct left hand preference for half of her little
life, I was pleased at the prospect of future intelligence. Despite all the cau-
tionary facts about which I was writing—regarding the correlation of any
single variable with sex-specific performance—and despite the relatively
small sample size in the study, I could not help experiencing the warm glow
of parental pride. In short, for a host of varying reasons, people may want
to believe in differences.

The great weight of tradition favors the difference view; culture has been
built around it for centuries. To believe otherwise might require change, and
people typically lean heavily in favor of the status quo; the inertial impulse
is huge. Our society also focuses on differences other than sex differences,
and this general attention to differences may feed the acceptance of sex dif-
fferences. We are preoccupied with biological causes in realms other than sex
differences. Researchers and the American public are continually searching
for genetic markers of alcoholism, insanity, Alzheimer’s, aggression, risk
taking, and many other diseases and behaviors. The discovery of genetic
causal links in other areas probably disposes us to accept the fixity of sex dif-
fferences. The search for biological origins of behavior is undoubtedly part
of the general—and useful—exploration of causal relations, but it can take a dangerously myopic turn. The search for first (and final) causes can easily become reductionist. Oddly, the complexities of genetics in explaining sex differences seem simpler and more “scientific” than the murkier amalgam of historical, anthropological, sociological, and psychological explanations for gender differences.

We tend to think of differences in an all or nothing way: differences must be either innate or learned. The process of scientific research may tend to downplay the interdependence between internal and external causes. Each study is a search for similarities or differences, often the latter. And each research venture looks at a piece of the whole biosocial gender puzzle. The isolated nature of research inquiries, therefore, structurally shifts attention from the macro level of interplay between biological and social causes to the micro level of individual causes.

Biological information—whether dealing with genetic markers, insanity tests, medical tests, DNA fingerprinting, or polygraphs—has extraordinary social consequences. Scientific testing has the power to label behavior functional or dysfunctional, and to attribute those behaviors to biological causes. The public also accords an exalted place to the results of scientific experiments, particularly when those tests speak in measurable, quantifiable terms. In turn, popular beliefs in the biological origins of behavior can have dramatic consequences on social arrangements. If people think that roles and distinctions in life are based on biologically occurring sex-related differences, they may accept sex-based distinctions as correct and perhaps inevitable.

Contemporary Cultural Practices

How many of the toddler boys on television snuggle in bed with a pink blanket? As you drive around town, have you seen many “Father’s Day Out” signs in church yards? The reflections of culturally enforced notions of gender are not difficult to find; their sources are somewhat more problematic. As these brief examples indicate, so often gender stereotypes are deeply embedded and thus hidden, appearing as stereotypes only when the gender manifestation jars with traditional expectations.

An array of cultural influences concretizes the separation of the genders. Masculinity and femininity are cultural constructs, and children are socialized to conform to cultural expectations of gender. Some of these practices
also promote the stereotypic attribution of certain qualities to each of the
genders. Observed gender differences can be traced to differential socializa-
tion of male and female children. As we track the gendering process from
infancy through adulthood, we will see that experiences in the sociocultural
context are extremely important in the formation of gender identity.

Infancy and Early Childhood

In America we gender children from birth. While the determination of a
child’s sex is a biological event, the formation of gender identity is a cultural
process. Sex differentiation begins with birth announcements proclaiming
the baby’s sex, color-coded baby blankets, and gender-appropriate infant
gifts. Schooling, parenting, social relations, and play activities all construct
gender identity. Studies repeatedly confirm that parents, grandparents,
teachers, and strangers treat male and female children, from infancy on-
ward, differently based on their sex. The message is unmistakable: girls and
boys belong in separate categories and follow wholly different sets of rules.

At a young age, children understand the concept of sex-group mem-
bership. By two years of age, children can correctly identify whether they are
boys or girls. Toddlers have already begun to mimic and incorporate gen-
dered mannerisms of their same-sex parent. Certainly some behavioral dif-
ferences of toddlers have biological influences. Studies have demonstrated
that even at very early ages, boys are more aggressive, active, and exploratory
than girls. The muscles of two-year-old boys may be better developed than
those of two-year-old girls, which may facilitate more active or aggressive
play. It is impossible, though, to separate the biological and social influ-
ences, when the genetic differences that do exist are instantly and strongly
reinforced.

For many years, behavioral differences of infants and toddlers were per-
cieved as rooted in biology. More recent research, though, has exposed the
early cultural influences to which baby girls and boys are subjected. The evi-
dence is overwhelming that parents respond differentially, and with gen-
der-stereotypic expectations, to very young children. Physically, parents
treat their newborns in gender-specific ways. Parents swaddle infant girls
and handle them more delicately, while bouncing baby boys and permitting
them greater freedom to explore. A group of researchers reviewing the lit-
erature regarding gendered play differences concluded, “Mothers seem to be
more emotionally warm and responsive with girls, and more encouraging
of independence with boys. Fathers often spend more time with their sons
and engage in more physical play with sons than with daughters.\textsuperscript{73} Parents are even likely to perceive the behavior of newborn infants as conforming to gender stereotypes, and respond in ways that guide children toward gender-stereotypic behavior.\textsuperscript{74} In one study, parents of newborns who scored equally on a number of indicators (such as weight, height, and muscle tone) were asked to describe their child. The parents rated their boys as larger, more muscular, and more coordinated, while describing their girls as softer, less coordinated, and more fragile.\textsuperscript{75}

Most parents relentlessly tutor their boys to develop athletic skills, indulge boys’ interests in cars, trucks, and tools, and encourage boys to be brave when they are hurt. Many parents also try to diminish their girls’ rough play and promote nurturant doll play and cooperative social behaviors instead. In short, what parents think of as the “car and truck gene” may be the result of more physical play with baby boys, a greater provision of typically masculine toys, the decoration of the infant’s room with male-toy motifs, and other gendering behaviors on the part of the parents. Studies show that the vast majority of parents—even parents committed to egalitarianism—abide by society’s gender role expectations.

Discouraging Gender Deviance

Parents typically provide their children, from infancy on, with gender-appropriate toys. Little boys in particular are discouraged from cross-gender play activities. Most children request sex-typed toys, and most parents comply with those requests. One study of eighty-six children, however, revealed an interesting pattern for nonrequested toys. In that study, “[n]ot one boy received a toy judged to be cross-sexed, and although only 8% of the total nonrequested toys the girls received were cross-sexed, one third of the girls received at least one cross-sexed toy.”\textsuperscript{76} Parents thus demonstrated a specific reluctance to give their children, particularly their boys, toys deemed appropriate for the opposite sex. In another study comparing children’s Christmas wish lists with the toys they received, parents were much less likely to purchase requested but gender-atypical toys from the children’s lists.\textsuperscript{77} Parents generally reward gender-typical play and punish gender-atypical activities. Researchers have found that even parents who report that they did not encourage sex-stereotyped play with toys subtly did so with questions, suggestions, and nonverbal reinforcement.\textsuperscript{78}

When little girls cross the gender divide and play with action figures, cars, and sporting equipment, they are labeled “tomboys.” Being called a
tomboy is mildly prestigious in some circles; nowhere in the country is being called a “sissy” a compliment. Even parents who describe themselves as nonsexist flinch when their eight-year-old son wants to play “beanie babies” with the girl across the street. They fear that identification with typically feminine activities will result in effeminate behavior and will guarantee that their son will grow up to be homosexual.

Although a girl can now wear almost any item of clothing and play with almost any toy without so much as an eyebrow being raised by her social community, let a boy even once have the urge to try on a princess costume in the dress-up corner of his nursery school, and his parents and teachers will instantly schedule a conference to discuss the adequacy of his gender identity.79

Gender separatism is intricately tied to homophobia. “Much of the psychological literature examining homophobia has concluded that support for the traditional gender-role structure is a primary cause of homophobia.”80 One result of treating women as “inferior” is the creation of homophobia, especially toward gay males, since they are perceived as “acting” like women. Gays and lesbians are a threat to the prevailing ideology of gender separatism: their existence demonstrates one of the flaws in society’s binary construction of gender.

Children, the Media, and Gender: Image Indoctrination

Gender stereotypes are embedded in the images children see in literature and on television. While some of the literary stereotypes about girls seem to be diminishing, many of the stereotypes about boys persist with the same force. Studies comparing characters in Caldecott Medal books and Coretta Scott King award-winning books in the past decade with Caldecott winners in the 1970s have shown a greater visibility of female characters in children’s storybooks, and less stereotypic behavior of female characters.81 Girls and women in children’s books written in the mid- to late 1980s are more adventurous, aggressive, competitive, and independent. Male characters, however, are depicted in traditional gender roles. Boys are rarely portrayed as passive, dependent, or nurturing beings; they are expected to be the problem solvers. They are unlikely to be shown caring for a pet or a sibling.82 While it is becoming increasingly acceptable culturally for girls to engage in what society has traditionally viewed as masculine behaviors, boys still cannot cross the gender divide and engage in traditionally feminine ways.
Consider the illustration of “boy behavior” in several prominent children’s books. Mercer Mayer’s Little Critter series for preschoolers depicts conventional gender role behavior. In Just Me and My Mom, Little Critter and his mother spend the day together going shopping, while in Just Me and My Dad, Little Critter’s father takes him camping for their special time together. In Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are and Crockett Johnson’s Harold and the Purple Crayon, “[s]mall boys are characterized by naughtiness, anger, oppositional feelings, and desires for nighttime adventure.”83 In the modern classic Willy the Wimp, by Anthony Browne, the protagonist is a small, sweet-natured but unhappy gorilla, who worries about stepping on insects and apologizes for things that are not his fault. Willy, dressed in a patchwork vest, tie, and rainbow-striped socks, is bullied by a suburban gorilla gang. (He apologizes when they hit him.) Embarking on a mail-order Charles Atlas program of diet, exercises, jogging, aerobics, boxing, and weight lifting, he transforms himself into a larger physical specimen. The ending is thuddingly predictable: Willy now feels good about himself and wins the heart of the girl gorilla whom he rescues from the gang.

On the preteen reading shelf, the extraordinarily popular Baby-sitters Club books, which portray adolescent girls in training for caring and nurturing roles, have no parallel for boys. And the club itself is an exclusive one, with no boy members. The club does have one male “associate member”—a boyfriend of the principal character—who has been featured in two of the series’ hundred-plus books . . . at the request of readers. The “special edition” book, Logan’s Story, introducing this male associate member of the Baby-sitters club, forthrightly addresses the issue of stereotyping in the first few pages:

Now, a lot of people think the Baby-sitters club is all girls. I mean, when you think of a baby-sitter, you think of a girl, right? Admit it. But it’s sort of like the stereotype of jocks. It just doesn’t make sense. Guys can take care of kids, too. They can play games and pick up toys and give baths and make dinner—no big deal.84

This positive portrayal of a boy in a principal caregiving role, however, is undercut by the messages sent in other passages of the book. Logan explains that as an associate—not a real—member, he “[doesn’t] go to regular meetings or pay dues. I just fill in when things get busy.” He mentions that he has received some teasing about his association with the Baby-sitters Club, but that “it wasn’t so bad at first. Most of the guys didn’t even know I had this...
‘secret life’ as a baby-sitter.” A few short pages later in the book, Logan refers to his father’s lukewarm reaction to his baby-sitting and his father’s assumption that he is an associate member only because he is “hot for Mary Anne.” To this, Logan says, “(Well, in a way, he’s right.) Just in a way, though. I do enjoy kids, and I also like the other club members.”

The gender coding replicates on the small screen. Children watch an average of twenty-one hours of television per week. The images they see relentlessly present messages of gender-appropriate behavior. Cartoons, television programs, movies, and advertising all portray girls and boys and women and men in stereotypical occupations and behaviors. While advertising creates an emaciated standard for female beauty, it repeatedly depicts masculinity as rugged individualism, with portrayals of men as military officers and sports figures, tinkering with cars and riding on motorcycles. Males are rarely portrayed in principal caregiving roles. One study of pre- and post-1980 cartoons found that while the picture has changed somewhat for female characters in a less stereotypical direction, in the cartoons evaluated, “male characters were never shown as caregivers.”85 A 1996 study showed that boy characters in cartoons are much more likely to use aggression than girls, while girls are twice as likely to demonstrate affection.86

One of the most influential children’s television forums, Sesame Street, has repeatedly tackled the issue of gender stereotypes. In the early 1990s the producers became concerned that all the principal Muppets on the show were male: Bert, Ernie, Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, the Count, Cookie Monster, Grover, and Elmo. (Miss Piggy, while a Muppet, is not a denizen of Sesame Street.) The writers tried to create strong female characters, but Grundgetta, Prairie Dawn, Rosita, Baby Alice Snuffleupagus, and the Squirrelles (a Motown-sounding trio of squirrels) did not rise to celebrity status. Finally, in 1993, after a quarter of a century of programming, Sesame Street acquired a successful girl Muppet with other than a walk-on role. When Zoe, a furry orange monster, joined the cast as a friend of Elmo, a furry red monster, initially she was not a hit with the Happy Meal crowd: too deep a voice, not enough jewels, too androgynous. A marketing survey followed, and children advised the show’s research director to dress Zoe in beads, dangly earrings, and hair bows. Once these gender cues were added, Zoe’s popularity zoomed.

Zoe’s story is a good example of one of the gender feedback loops in operation. Gender differences that are unsupported by real differences in biology, such as clothes and accessories, become so deeply a part of the ways we...
understand gender that the socially constructed expectations become the reality.

At about the same time that Zoe moved in, the neighborhood was pre-occupied with gender issues other than the scarcity of female role models. A fundamentalist minister tried to “out” Bert and Ernie as the first gay couple on children’s television: “They live together in a one-bedroom house, never do anything without each other, and exhibit feminine characteristics.” Sesame Street’s producers issued a press release patiently explaining that Bert and Ernie were puppets and did not have genitalia or a sex life of any kind. That reassurance did not squelch the rumors, although it slowed the flood of mail from concerned parents that their tykes were witnessing a “deviant” lifestyle. As the attempted “outing” of Bert and Ernie shows, media images of gender are continuously shaped by the stereotypic expectations of the prevailing culture.

Domestic Labor

One of the principal influences on gender role identity is observed parental roles. Traditionally in America, mothers have assumed primary responsibility for housework and child care, while fathers have been the material providers. The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a slight decrease in traditionalism regarding the division of domestic responsibilities, but the basic gendered division of household responsibilities has changed very little. What children witness at home on a daily basis shapes their concepts of gender roles, and what children in America see even today is the gendering of a household.

Even in the late 1990s, a time when more than two-thirds of mothers with young children work outside the home, women shoulder the vast amount of domestic chores in terms of sheer numbers of hours and effort. And the hours spent on domestic labor reflect the gendering of household tasks. Women typically do cooking, cleaning, and laundry and have primary responsibilities for child care and other family demands, while men typically perform major repair projects. The mental picture children will carry with them to adulthood is the vision of mom toting a laundry basket and dad hefting power tools.

Making calculations based on time use studies, and adding the time from paid employment, housework, and child care, sociologist Arlie Hochschild reported that “women worked roughly 15 hours longer each week than men. Over a year, they worked an extra month of twenty-four-hour days a
year. Over a dozen years, it was an extra year of twenty-four-hour days.”
In Hochschild’s study, only one-fifth of the men shared equally in the housework. The traditional division of labor also affords different dimensions of freedom to the sexes:

Even when couples share more equitably in the work at home, women do two-thirds of the daily jobs at home, like cooking and cleaning up—jobs that fix them into a rigid routine. Most women cook dinner and most men change the oil in the family car. But, as one mother pointed out, dinner needs to be prepared every evening around six o’clock, whereas the car oil needs to be changed every six months, any day around that time, any time that day.

Hochschild’s findings are confirmed in a study by two economists, Michael Leeds and Peter von Allmen. In a survey of 4,500 married, dual-career couples between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four, the participants kept track of the hours each week they spent on housework. Fifteen percent of the men responding said they performed less than one hour per week of domestic chores. “[T]he median amount of work for men was about five hours weekly, and the median for women was about 20 hours.”

The gendering of housework may run deeper than simply women absorbing a larger share of a finite amount of joint domestic responsibilities. An important additional finding of the Leeds and von Allmen study was that if husbands increased the number of hours they worked around the house, wives did not decrease their work. One possibility is that men and women may be culturally conditioned to believe that certain types of work or a certain amount of work is expected of them.

Men’s and women’s perceptions about housework diverge markedly. In one survey men’s perceptions of who bears primary responsibility for various chores differed substantially from the perceptions of their wives: “Of those men with working spouses or partners, 69 percent said their mates took major responsibility for cooking, whereas 87 percent of the working wives said they did. Similarly, 78 percent of the working women said they were responsible for cleaning, as opposed to 63 percent of men who said their wives did the cleaning.”

One reason so many spouses and partners have disagreements over household chores is that men’s and women’s frames of reference may differ. Men may be comparing the amount of domestic work they perform to the amount their fathers did, which yields a favorable comparison, while women may be comparing the amount of work men are doing to the amount of work the women themselves are doing. The discrepancy in ref-
erence points is part of the cultural transition from traditional to more egalitarian roles.

The conventional division of outside and domestic responsibilities persists in another way: men are expected to be society’s breadwinners. Men invest nine more hours per week at the office than women.\textsuperscript{92} Men report more travel in their employment than women, and longer commuting times. The economic and societal pressures on men to be the principal wage earners keep them away from home for longer hours, cutting down on the time men have available for child care. In America fathers spend about forty-five minutes per day caring for their children alone, while mothers average more than ten hours on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{93} According to James A. Levine, director of the Fatherhood Project of the Families and Work Institute, “Women are still doing twice as much [child care] as men, although 20 years ago they were doing three times as much.”\textsuperscript{94}

While popular media depict fathers as significantly involved in their children's lives, the reality has not kept pace with its promotions: “notwithstanding the discussion of a changing masculinity, few studies have shown that men are becoming more expressive and intimate.”\textsuperscript{95} Even when there is increased paternal involvement with children, “most of these fathers still behave in traditional ways toward their children.”\textsuperscript{96}

Education

Gender separatism is rampant in schools. Segregation by gender occurs significantly during middle childhood. First- through fourth-graders possess deeply held beliefs about the opposite sex having cooties or other undesirable qualities. But these are not beliefs that spontaneously erupt along with adult teeth. These beliefs are taught by peers, parents, and teachers. For instance, the ways teachers or administrators configure the building may foster the separatism. My son’s elementary school has separate coat shelves for boys and girls, to discourage intermingling of jackets and bookbags, or perhaps their owners. Gender may also be an easy, efficient way of regulating the use of various school resources: “Girls, you wash your hands at the sink. When you finish, boys, it will be your turn to wash your hands.” And what second-grade class has not divided into the boys against the girls for purposes of a game? By middle school or high school, consider the gender composition of such coeducational public school classes as home economics or shop or such activities as cheerleading, Little League, the chess club, or synchronized swimming. Add into the equation the millions of girls and
boys each year who join the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, YMCA, YWCA, fraternities, and sororities.

Much gender separatism seems to be a matter of individual choice or self-selection. Observational studies of primary school children show that generally boys and girls prefer to play with members of their own sex.97 Boys move toward games of football or soccer, while girls congregate near the school and participate in hopscotch or foursquare. But what begins as self-segregation can be promoted by a teacher’s responsive behavior: “Justin, if you don’t lower your voice, you’ll have to move over to the girls’ table.” Teachers, like parents, are a significant source of beliefs and messages about gender-appropriate behavior. Even teachers professing egalitarian gender ideology provide gendered messages. Some teachers will subtly encourage girls toward literary activities by spending more time with girls when they are reading and, similarly, will nudge boys toward math and science. Not only do young children learn what tasks are culturally appropriate for their gender, they are taught to prefer to excel at activities that are considered gender-appropriate. Thus, gender researchers have suggested that since “reading is viewed as feminine, and math as masculine by adults and children alike, . . . this leads children to achieve more in the subject perceived as being more gender-appropriate than in the subject perceived as being less gender-appropriate.”98

Researchers agree that boys volunteer more frequently and volubly than girls. According to one study, boys are eight times more likely than girls to call out an answer in class.99 Whether volunteering or not, boys receive more teacher attention. A study by the Gender/Ethnic Expectation and Student Achievement program revealed that “Los Angeles teachers responded four to nine times as often to boys.”100 Teachers generally tolerate interruptions by boys better than those by girls. Education professors Myra Sadker and David Sadker observe, “Whether male comments are insightful or irrelevant, teachers respond to them. However, when girls call out, there is a fascinating occurrence: Suddenly, the teacher remembers the rule about raising your hand before you talk. And then the girl, who is usually not as assertive as the male students, is deftly and swiftly put back in her place.”101

The attention boys receive is not all positive. The Wellesley College Center for Research on Women notes that “[b]oys, particularly low-achieving boys, receive eight to 10 times as many reprimands as do their female classmates. . . . When both girls and boys are misbehaving equally, boys still receive more frequent discipline.”102 Some teachers seem less concerned about hurting boys’ feelings. Boys are expected to be tough and are handled more
physically. Other studies show the intersection between boys’ academic performance and high-risk behavior. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice show that “high school boys are four times more likely than girls to be murdered; they are more prone to abuse alcohol or drugs; boys 12 to 15 run double the risk faced by girls of becoming victims of a violent crime, and 82% of the nation’s incarcerated youths 18 and under are male—a percentage that increases to an estimated 95% for adult men.”

Boys are more likely than girls to be truant, repeat grades, flunk, and be placed in special education classes. Nationwide, two-thirds of students in special education classes for learning, developmental, and behavioral problems are boys. And boys who are members of racial minorities are much more likely than whites to be placed in special education classes and to be classified as educably mentally retarded. Boys, particularly minority boys, have “a disproportionately large percentage of behavioral problems.”

Boys also run a much greater risk of expulsion than girls. One study conducted in the Florida school system by the Department of Education found that while males were 51 percent of the student body, male students accounted for 78 percent of the expulsions. The study also showed strong links between poor school performance and greater discipline, and between race and economic position and discipline: “poor, black male students were overrepresented among students who were disciplined.” Nationally, 7.2 percent of boys, compared to 6.5 percent of girls, will drop out of school prior to the tenth grade.

The evidence that boys are more likely to suffer emotional disturbance and educational disabilities or engage in delinquent behaviors raises grave questions about biology, acculturation, and masculinity. The problems may be traceable to a confluence of factors, such as neurological differences between boys and girls, the lack of male role models, and cultural expectations of masculine behavior. Many of those social and even biological forces are changeable, but changes will require sorting out the ways and degrees to which behaviors are biologically influenced and socially created.

At this juncture, we have to ask whether our culture has pathologized behavior that is simply a manifestation of the prevailing construct of masculinity. Characterize a child as “rowdy,” “noisy,” “obnoxious,” “competitive,” “belligerent,” or “aggressive,” and more likely than not you are describing a boy. If a teen is labeled a “juvenile delinquent,” chances are most people would mentally picture a male. Our thoughts of what it means to be a boy or a girl are embedded in nursery rhymes (boys are made of “snips and snails and puppy dogs’ tails” while girls are made of “sugar and spice and
everything nice”), aphorisms (“boys will be boys” is a popular homily that not only excuses a variety of misbehaviors, but carries forward and reinforces the social creation of gendered roles), and truths about appropriate behaviors (“big boys don’t cry”). “[T]o some degree, society believes that boys are, by definition, bad.”

Society expects boys to develop the traits of dominance: independence, self-reliance, competitiveness, and leadership. Yet if boys learn the lessons too well and are too exuberant in their assertiveness, too extreme in their risk taking, or too defiant in their independence, we diagnose the biological disease of “testosterone poisoning.” At times the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior is dangerously thin. When the news reports first began to roll out about the six-year-old from Lexington, North Carolina, who was disciplined for sexual harassment, I wondered if the case was a good example of the point. According to initial reports, a teacher observed Johnathan Prevette kissing a classmate on the cheek, and he was suspended for “sexual harassment.” He became a cause célèbre; America was up in arms that a first-grader was labeled a sex offender. The law of sexual harassment had gone too far, responding to such trivial situations.

Later reports disclosed that it was not the case that a teacher witnessing the behavior had turned Johnathan in as a sex offender, but that the girl had complained about the kiss to a teacher, and that the principal had determined that his behavior was “unwelcome touching”—not sexual harassment—under the school’s general conduct code. Johnathan was not suspended, but he was removed from the classroom for a day, missing the group’s ice cream party. Then Prevette’s parents encouraged him to do the talk show circuit— CNN, the Today Show, and NBC News. This seems to be where the sexual harassment label was applied. Yet conservative civil rights groups since have touted this case as an example of the misguided nature of sexual harassment laws. Johnathan’s parents have threatened litigation unless the school issues a written apology. At a press conference on the courthouse steps, Jackie Prevette, wearing a “Kiss Me Johnathan” button, demanded an apology from the school. And the girl who complained about Johnathan’s behavior? She feels guilty for stirring up trouble.

A number of things are wrong with this picture: Johnathan’s parents’ reaction, the media’s reaction, and perhaps even the school’s reaction. What seems most tragic about this incident is how quickly the entire country leaped on one side of a gender bandwagon, holding Johnathan up as an example of how sexual correctness has gone too far. This episode may cause a ready dismissal of actual cases of sexual harassment in elementary and sec-
ondary schools, a phenomenon that is the norm, while the case of Johnathan Prevette is the exception.

An American Association of University Women survey of 1,600 eighth-through eleventh-grade students found that four out of five students had experienced sexual harassment at school.\(^{110}\) Sixty-five percent of the girls had been physically touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual manner. This peer harassment may consist of bra snapping, breast grabbing, obscene graffiti, sexual comments, catcalls, sexist remarks, unwelcome advances, or solicitation of sexual activity. At an elementary school in Montana, Friday was “Flip-Up Day,” during which boys would chase girls to try to flip up their skirts.\(^{111}\)

Legally, there has been some headway into the problem of peer sexual harassment. Since 1992, educational institutions may be held liable under Title IX for failing to take appropriate steps to eliminate peer harassment.\(^{112}\) And many school officials are developing programs to educate students about unwelcome sexual conduct. However, parents and peers may model inappropriate behavior. An extreme example of the point was the case of the Spur Posse, a group of popular, athletic high school boys in a Los Angeles suburb who gained national attention by engaging in a sex-for-points competition to see who could sleep with the greatest number of girls. The girls were as young as ten years old. After the incidents came to light, some classmates and family members applauded the boys as studs, and labeled the girls “sluts.” The mother of one of the Spur Posse members blamed the girls, saying to a news reporter, “Those girls were trash,” while the father defended his son proudly: “Nothing my boy did was anything that any red-blooded American boy wouldn’t do at his age.”\(^{113}\)

Even if parents are not condoning statutory rape and schools are condemning sexual harassment, in subtle ways they may be reinforcing gender stereotypes or the process of demarcation that leads to stereotyping. As the case of little Johnathan Prevette indicates, parents, teachers, and the media may be creating the idea that gender disputes have only two sides. Which side do you choose: the side that defends child-victims of oppressive sexual harassment laws or the side that supports child-victims of sexual harassment? Is the unwelcome kiss of a first-grader sexual harassment or was a little boy wrongfully punished for affectionate behavior? Whose side are you on: Johnathan’s or the girl’s?

People may be quick to seize on exceptional cases and readily categorize them, creating sharply dichotomous choices. One aspect of gender separatism is the construction of these warring dualisms. Perhaps a third side
exists, one that recognizes the enormity of the harassment problem, the possibility of victims on both sides, and the delicacy and yet utmost importance of teaching young girls and boys the differences between good and bad touching, without labels, rancor, or blame.

Gendering in Adolescence

By adolescence, boys and girls have been bombarded with messages about what constitutes gender-appropriate behavior. Those messages have come from parents, teachers, peers, literature, television, radio, and movies. They have come also from institutions that establish sports programs, school activities, and employment opportunities. Even those parents who believe strongly in gender equity may feel compelled to socialize their children toward traditional gender norms to avoid seeing their children branded as social misfits.114

Parents may subtly perpetuate gender norms in ways they do not consciously recognize. Adolescent and family research demonstrates that fathers and mothers treat teenage boys differently than they do teenage girls. They encourage adolescent boys to work outside the home at an earlier age than adolescent girls. Parents assign household chores so that boys are not encouraged to do domestic chores, while girls are assigned housekeeping duties: “Girls do the dishes, boys do the lawn.”115 Later in life, girls act out the domestic chores they have been taught, while boys make little effort to overcome their learned helplessness in the domestic arena.116

Family behaviors regarding chores, benefits, and rules relating to independence (such as curfews and car usage) reflect significant gender biases. Parents transmit the idea that boys need cars more than girls and more supplemental income because they should take girls on dates or provide for their own economic well-being by working independently outside the home. Adolescent males are governed by more permissive rules regarding curfews and use of the family car.117 Parental responses inculcate and reinforce gender-specific sex role behavior.

A study of gender norms among high school students covering the late 1970s to the late 1980s indicated that boys acquired prestige principally through sports, grades, intelligence, and access to cars, while girls did so through their physical appearance, sociability, grades, and intelligence.118 One interesting finding of the study was that in the latter part of the 1980s, girls attained more prestige, in the perceptions of boys, through participation in sports.
Whether teenagers adhere to traditional models of behavior may depend on race, class, and economic differences. In the fall of 1996, the University of Missouri at Kansas City’s Women’s Council sponsored a symposium focusing on gendering in teens and young adults. One presentation consisted of panels of students discussing dating behavior. Students from Shawnee Mission North, a relatively affluent, predominantly white high school from a suburb in Kansas, described group dates, coffeehouse meetings, boys asking girls out, and girls asking boys out. A panel of girls from Paseo Academy, a predominantly black high school in the Kansas City, Missouri, metropolitan area, spoke uniformly of more rigid gender roles. They said that at their school, girls would never ask boys for a date, and if a boy were asked out by a girl, he would not agree, “out of respect for her.” Some of the panel members from Paseo, almost dispassionately, reported the terms guys would use to describe their girlfriends: “bitch,” “slut,” and “ho.”

Peer behavior and language, commercial products for teens, and music all craft the separation of the sexes during the teen years. The misogynistic lyrics in some gangsta rap music are well documented, such as 2 Live Crew’s “Put Her in the Buck”: “There’s only one way to have a good time—fuck that pussy and make it mine. . . . I’ll break you down and dick you long, bust your pussy and break your backbone.” Even when women rappers entered the fray to combat the male-dominated, antifemale vocals, some of it was simply parallel trash-talk about the opposite sex. Salt-n-Pepa’s hit “Tramp” offers the following advice: “Now what would you do if a stranger said ‘hi’? / Would you dis him or would you reply? / If you’d answer, there is a chance / That you’d become a victim of circumstance / Am I right fellas? Tell the truth / Or else I’ll have to show and prove / You are what you are I am what I am / It just so happens that most men are TRAMPS.”

Other female rockers send messages that define masculinity through women’s eyes as deception in relationships or connections made only through sexual encounters. Consider Sheryl Crow’s lyrics from “Strong Enough”—“Will you be strong enough to be my man? / Lie to me / I promise I’ll believe / Lie to me / But please don’t leave”—or Juliana Hatfield’s “Lost and Saved”: “I can’t help myself, I need a hand / Just when I think I’m dead, he turns up again in time for bed / I thank my lucky stars again. . . . I found a way to use my head / I go over and over every word he said.” These visions of gender, which bombard teenagers daily over the airwaves, denigrate females and prescribe specific roles and behaviors for males.

The gender divide among teens is apparent in the labels they give their peers. During a date rape prevention program at a Phoenix, Arizona, high
school, students described “ideal” men as “macho,” “strong,” and “domineering.” The same students described ideal women as “submissive” and “obedient.” Mixed-gender friendships are viewed with suspicion. The divide is visible in teen treatment of sexuality. Guys who have sex with numerous partners are admiringly called “players,” while girls who engage in the same behavior are called “whores.” The Spur Posse competition, the national attention it drew, and the parental reaction may be exceptional, but the vilification of girls for their sexuality and the condonation of boys who have sex is shockingly commonplace. A national survey of over 200,000 teenagers demonstrated the double standard: “Only 22 percent of boys and 15 percent of girls say it hurts a boy’s reputation, while 70 percent of boys and 87 percent of girls say a girl’s reputation is damaged.” In these inconspicuous but persistent ways sexism becomes normalized among adolescents.

The gender divide is kept firmly in place by the exclusion of alternate sexualities. Gay and lesbian teens have traditionally received the most negative treatment by their peers and parents. Faced with feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem, “[g]ay and lesbian youths account for as many as 30 percent of teenage suicides, up to 40 percent of teenage runaways, and a disproportionately high percentage of high school dropouts.” Although these teens are often the ones most in need of counseling, it is often hard for them to receive guidance because of opposition to gay and lesbian counseling. Parents in Palm Beach County, Florida, objected to a pamphlet that referred teens to a lesbian and bisexual counseling center for fear that youths with other problems would only receive guidance on sexual orientation issues. Even Congress got into the act when members of the House and Senate proposed amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that would cut federal funding to any school “that has the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative.” The state legislature of Utah went one step further and actually passed a bill that allows school boards in Utah to prohibit school clubs that “encourage criminal or delinquent conduct; promote bigotry; or involve human sexuality.” The legislation was passed after the Salt Lake City School Board voted to ban all extracurricular clubs, rather than allow a “gay-straight” alliance club to form.

Homophobia and heterosexism are powerful social forces that silence those whose sexual orientation is nonheterosexual. Teenagers are met with traditional institutional expectations about gender roles: since heterosexuality is the norm, homosexuality is abnormal and thus it must be discour-
aged; gay and lesbian teenagers’ experiences will be marginalized, their problems disregarded. These messages about homosexuality reinforce the strict separation of the sexes. The underlying theme is that discrimination based on gender roles is perfectly acceptable, and that crossing the gender divide is disallowed.

Sports

The largest feminist furor over sports has centered on inequality in the distribution of resources. For years, resources were allocated disproportionately to boys’ high school and college sports programs. The congressional enactment of Title IX in 1972 was an attempt to level the playing field. Title IX prohibits sex discrimination in the classroom and in athletic programs in schools receiving federal funds. The Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights developed guidelines for Title IX compliance, which require schools to (1) provide athletic participation opportunities roughly in proportion to the enrollment by gender; (2) demonstrate a persistent commitment to expanding program opportunities for the underrepresented sex; or (3) accommodate the athletic interests of the underrepresented gender.

With the passage of Title IX, the government has taken a position as a promoter of women’s rights. But the reach of Title IX was sharply limited by judicial interpretation of the legislation. In 1984 the Supreme Court held that no violation could be found by an institution that received federal funds unless the specific program that committed the discrimination directly received the federal money. Three years later Congress passed corrective legislation, the Civil Rights Restoration Act, which reversed the Supreme Court’s holding by giving institution-wide Title IX protection to any public program of higher education receiving any federal financial assistance. Title IX is enforced in two ways: through complaints from athletes and compliance reviews. The compliance reviews, though, are periodic and include only a few federally funded institutions at a time. To date, no institution has ever had its funding pulled by the Office of Civil Rights.

Legal action, media interest, and parental encouragement are dismantling some of the formal barriers to girls’ and women’s participation in high school and college sports. Since 1970 the number of high school girls playing varsity sports has increased ninefold; now, one in three high school girls plays a varsity sport, compared to one out of every two high school boys.
More oblique forms of preferential treatment remain. Boys’ teams still receive better media coverage, locker rooms, coaching, playing facilities, groomed athletic fields, equipment, and game times. Girls’ teams may have to use tape or chalk to affix numbers to the backs of their jerseys; they have fewer female coaches as role models, and no cheerleaders at their sporting events; they will probably carry their own water jugs. In collegiate athletics, the NCAA Gender Equity Task Force determined that “few, if any, athletic departments complied with Title IX’s requirements . . . men’s programs received approximately seventy percent of the athletic scholarship funds, seventy-seven percent of the operating budgets, and eighty-three percent of the recruiting money.”

Male domination in sports has its darker side for the construction of masculinity. The longtime exclusion of girls from sports is mirrored by relentless pressure on boys to engage in and excel at sports. We live in a culture that prizes sports and sees masculinity defined in part by athletic ability. Boys have to be good at sports or they are failures. The repeated childhood experience of choosing teams leads to shame and ridicule for those who are picked last. If boys are athletic, they have friends; if not, they are humiliated in gym class. Sports create hierarchies based on toughness and physical prowess. The sports themselves even have a hierarchy: the culturally more masculine sports, such as basketball and football, are prized over the less masculine sports, such as golf (a noncontact sport) and fencing (which looks a lot like dancing). Through sports, males undergo a socialization process that reconstitutes and transmits masculine hegemony.

Often boys are urged toward sports that celebrate certain qualities traditionally associated with masculinity: physicality, power, strength, risk taking, and competition. Coaches, parents, and peers pressure boys not only to excel at sports but to win. When boys are pushed to be heroes and take risks, the toll is both psychological and physical. According to a report by the Adolescent Health Initiative for the West Virginia Bureau of Public Health, “[b]oys were twice as likely as girls to die in auto accidents, three and a half times more likely to commit suicide, four times more likely to be killed by a firearm and five times more likely to drown.”

One subtle effect of sex-segregated sporting teams is the model of team building that is the implicit lesson. Many colleges, graduate schools, and employers look to see if individuals participated in team sports, on the theory that teamwork training builds behaviors of leadership and cooperation. What this means in segregated sports is that boys learn to help other boys.
Certainly, boys learn how to deal with other players who have greater or fewer athletic skills than they do, players who possess more or less confidence, or players with particular abilities; one sort of person they don’t learn to work with is someone of the opposite sex.

Sex segregation, coaching tactics that foster discrimination against women and homosexuals, and certain kinds of athletic discipline (such as coaches warning players against having sexual relations before important games) all make sports a training ground for sexism. Numerous studies have linked violence in particular sports with players’ acceptance of beliefs about appropriate masculine behavior. Boys are pressured to demonstrate toughness in sports. It is in this arena in particular that boys learn not to cry. Coaching strategies may involve ridiculing players for behavior that is unmasculine with taunts of “wimp,” “pussy,” and “faggot.” I attended a third-grade football practice and overheard a coach yell degradingly at the group of boys: “Come on girls, when I tell you to tackle, that means putting your weight behind it. You don’t resist linemen like this.” The coach made the gesture of a limp-wristed push. Being good at sports is connected with not being a girl. The explicit message is that a boy who does not demonstrate appropriately tough behavior is female or homosexual; the implicit message is that women and gay men are without worth.

Many major universities have had high-profile instances of sexual assaults by athletes. One study, covering thirty Division I colleges, found that “male college student-athletes, compared to the rest of the male student population, are responsible for a significantly higher percentage” of reported sexual abuse cases. In another three-year survey, the National Institute of Mental Health reported that athletes were involved in one out of every three sexual assaults at colleges. Male sexual identity is constructed in part by locker room myths and metaphors. Sociologist Don Sabo describes the link between sports and male sexuality: “Dating becomes a sport in itself, and ‘scoring,’ or having sex with little or no emotional involvement, is a mark of masculine achievement. Sexual relationships are games in which women are seen as opponents, and his scoring means her defeat.” The degradation of women is accompanied by a loss of male insights into sexuality, and, says Sabo, the absence of a “vocabulary of intimacy.”

Language

Since language permeates everything, it is unsurprising that the gender separatism reflected in various social spheres is embedded in language.
Conversation defines what humans are. Language is not simply a means for communicating ideas, it is social behavior that creates, conveys, and mediates relationships. A significant body of research explores the communication patterns of men and women.

In the 1980s and 1990s sociolinguists began to explore differences between men’s and women’s styles of communication. Professor of sociolinguistics Deborah Tannen says that boys and girls grow up in different cultures of communication: “Even if they grow up in the same neighborhood, on the same block, or in the same house, girls and boys grow up in different worlds of words. Others talk to them differently and expect and accept different ways of talking from them.”

Girls often use language to emphasize rapport in relationships—telling secrets, exchanging compliments, displaying modesty about knowledge, and encouraging group participation. Boys tend to use language to seek status—giving orders as a leader or parading knowledge. These patterns transform into adult behavior. Women characteristically use language to create intimacy, foster consensus, and preserve a sense of community, while men use conversations to attain positions in the hierarchy of social organizations. Tannen says men view life as a contest, in which the objectives are to retain independence and avoid failure. Thus, during everyday conversations, men seek respect and give advice and solutions, while women seek affection and offer understanding.

The works of Tannen and others show how patterns of discourse may result in subordination and domination. Conversation for both sexes is a means of negotiating status, but women and men use conversation in different ways. Men tend to apologize infrequently, while women apologize as a conversation ritual; women are more likely to be indirect in making a point and to minimize the certainty of their statements; men generally dominate in formal conversations through interruptions, topic control, and length of talking time.

In an oddly ironic move, popular authors and readers are using the work of gender sociolinguists as evidence that women and men will naturally and universally misunderstand each other. A friend of mine who is a professor at an East Coast law school tells a story illustrating this phenomenon. He assigned his Gender and the Law class some works by Carol Gilligan and Deborah Tannen. A student in the class read the material and said during the seminar, “Now I know why my marriage didn’t work, and why I should never get married again. No way I can ever really talk to a woman.” Several other members of the class voiced their agreement. Others in the class, along with my professor friend, tried to convince these students that Tan-
nen and other sociolinguists are attempting to open up possibilities for cross-gender conversations. Their point in doing this exploratory research is that only by recognizing the gap in communication can we ever hope to close it.

The law students are not the only ones drawing the conclusion that differences between the genders are ineluctable. In the last half decade, publishers have released an extraordinary spate of self-help books for gender problems. For instance, there is John Gray’s best-selling *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationship* and its sequel, *Mars and Venus in the Bedroom: A Guide to Lasting Romance and Passion*, and its follow-up, *Mars and Venus Together Forever: Relationship Skills for Lasting Love*, and the latest installment, *Mars and Venus in Love*. These training manuals also include Lillian Glass’s *He Says, She Says: Closing the Communication Gap between the Sexes*, Justin Sterling’s *What Really Works with Men: Solve 95% of Your Relationship Problems (and Cope with the Rest)*, *Men: A Translation for Women* by Joan Shapiro, and Cris Evatt’s *He and She: Fascinating Facts about the Differences between Men and Women*.

Some of these workshop leaders, motivational speakers, and relationship gurus magnify the differences between the sexes—whether for purposes of illustration or profit is not entirely clear. The implication, though, is all too clear: the sexes are inevitably separated, members of different species or inhabitants of different planets. John Gray writes, “When you remember that your partner is as different from you as someone from another planet, you can relax and cooperate with the differences instead of resisting or trying to change them.” Justin Sterling prefers the species metaphor: “Men communicate through actions, as a German shepherd does. . . . Because dogs can’t speak with words, nonverbal communication is all you can rely on to understand your dog. It is all you should rely on to understand a man.”

The underlying assumption of many popular cross-gender conversation books is that gender differences are fixed: men and women do not communicate because they are such radically different beings; these differences can be understood and adapted to, but not changed. The inherent financial interest in the existence of differences cannot be overlooked; the industry’s continued existence depends on the persistence of differences. A mini industry is being built on making cross-gender conversations possible. On the one hand, these books may be making valuable contributions toward promoting cross-gender dialogue by encouraging recognition of typically gendered behavioral patterns. This comports with the academic message of
many sociolinguists. On the other hand, the implicit and at times explicit message is that differences between the sexes are necessary and inevitable. The books written for the popular media tend to promote the acceptance of basic differences and devise strategies to cope with the differences, rather than trying to effect any changes in the behaviors that manifest the differences. This is part of a much larger cultural habit to take the given, the norm, as the natural. Until the norms are challenged, the gender line will remain firmly in place, recommunicated every day in ordinary dialogue, and appearing fixed and natural.

Occupational Segregation by Sex

Occupational segregation clusters women in low-wage jobs. Historically, and still persistently, women are often excluded from professional occupations, particularly from the upper echelons of the professions. While nearly half of all paid workers in America are women, women rarely attain senior management positions. “[T]he CEOs for all but five of the Fortune 500 industrial and service companies are men.”\(^{141}\) Although U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that 41 percent of all managers are women,\(^{142}\) “[w]omen in the executive ranks are over-represented in staff support functions such as communications, human resources, and legal affairs. Few female executives head core business areas such as sales and marketing functions, manufacturing plants, and major operating divisions.”\(^{143}\) These features are significant aspects of the economic subordination of women. They are tied to lesser job training opportunities for women, women’s responsibilities as primary caregivers and household workers, and the sociocultural role of women as secondary wage earners, which constrains their occupational choices.\(^{144}\)

The mirror image of the exclusion of women from professional tracks is the nonacceptance of men in traditionally female occupations. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, males accounted for only 2 percent of kindergarten teachers nationwide and 2.7 percent of child care workers, almost precisely the same percentage as two decades ago.\(^{145}\) This pattern persists in other jobs traditionally associated with women. Men made up only 3.6 percent of receptionists and 6.2 percent of registered nurses. The preclusion of men from certain occupations is a largely invisible form of sex discrimination. Three dissenting Supreme Court justices maintained in 1982 that exclusion of male students from Mississippi University’s nursing school did not “present . . . a serious equal protection claim of sex discrimination.”\(^{146}\)
Researchers have demonstrated that if a certain category of people is believed to be less competent in general, then a specific individual’s performance is viewed more negatively and that individual’s success is more likely to be explained by factors other than ability. The same sorts of gender stereotypes that have hampered women’s promotion in various professional arenas apply to men who assume primary responsibilities in the domestic realm. A United States census survey showed that approximately one million fathers stay at home as the primary caregivers of their children, compared to sixteen million mothers. In one survey more than half the full-time dads reported that they were “extremely satisfied” with their career choice. While full-time fathers may have a greater degree of social acceptance in the 1990s than in the past, many describe the stigmas they face, and the ways their self-esteem suffers from societal reactions to their occupying the role of primary parent.

Almost every stay-at-home father has a story about being treated like an anomaly. They report being greeted with suspicion by mothers at playgrounds and playgroups. Peter Baylies, a full-time father and the editor of the newsletter At Home Dad, says, “I went to a mothers’ playgroup and I sat down and . . . they were pretty surprised to see me. It was almost like being interviewed. Yet, what I do is no different from what they do.” The atypicality of the arrangement is reinforced by questions (“Are you laid off for a while?” “Are you babysitting today?” “Giving your wife a break?”) and by unsolicited advice from strangers on the clothing and feeding of children. One full-time father described himself as “a freak.” Social institutions reinforce the women-only preserve. While some preschools and churches have Parents’ Day Out programs, many are still called Mothers’ Day Out programs; images of incompetence are depicted in movies such as Mr. Mom; elementary classrooms typically still have “room mothers.”

For men, staying home with children usually is not an option that is on their plate of choices because of economic necessity and social constraint. Ask a group of men whether they could, if they wanted, stay at home to raise children. It is a question I have asked my law school classes and various social and civil groups. The answer is unwavering: the vast majority of men would feel guilty about not providing for their families. As one man in an audience of lawyers said, “I couldn’t do that. It was never a possibility that was in my consciousness; that wasn’t the way I was raised.”

Indeed, external economic circumstances—rather than initial decisions about preferred social arrangements—are often the driving force behind fathers taking a principal role in child care. Peter Baylies has found from anec-
dotal evidence that the main reason full-time fathers stay home with their children is that they were laid off from their jobs. Statistical evidence confirms this conclusion. Between 1977 and 1988 approximately 15 percent of children were cared for by their fathers. In 1991 fathers were the principal caregivers for 20 percent of children, but the figure dropped to 16 percent three years later. According to the Census Bureau, this correlates with an economic downturn in 1990 and 1991 and greater employment prospects after 1993.148

At the end of the second millennium, men have greater social permission, and concomitantly greater obligations, to engage in child rearing, yet men do not have the freedom not to work outside the home. Although men say they want to take a more active role in their families’ lives, corporate America has not caught up with this new reality. Jackie Church, a consultant at Work/Family Directions, says that “the senior men and women at policy and decision-making levels in these companies don’t understand . . . After all, they got to where they are by devoting themselves entirely to their career at the expense of family.”149 The pressures felt by women to balance work and family demands are matched by the tension felt by men to be both a major breadwinner and an involved father. A *New York Times*-CBS poll found that “83 percent of women and 72 percent of men expressed feeling torn between work and family responsibilities.”

In 1993 Congress passed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which requires private sector employers of fifty or more employees to allow workers up to twelve weeks per year of unpaid leave for the birth or adoption of a child or a serious medical condition of the employee or a family member. Men do not take advantage of parenting leave nearly as much as women: “only 2 percent of men eligible for paternity leave ask for it.”150 While leave is legally available to both women and men, there are enormous social and financial pressures on men not to take time off. Coworkers may demonstrate resentment; supervisors may question the employee’s “commitment.” It is not surprising that studies show “many men still disguise the true nature of those days off. They either call in sick themselves, take a vacation day or say they are working from home.”151 Finally, most people simply cannot afford the time off. A Gallup poll taken in the year Congress was contemplating the FMLA revealed that seven out of ten workers would be financially unable to take unpaid time off for births or family emergencies.152 The division of labor that relegates men to the employment arena is a structural barrier to men’s participation in child rearing. The gendering of labor is not fixed, but is dictated largely by social and economic conditions.
In addition to facing societal expectations that they must be the primary breadwinners, men confront sharp economic and social consequences for selecting nontraditional career paths. While men may not be attracted to caregiving jobs because of low pay and minimal prestige, they are also culturally shunted away from nurturing and some types of service occupations. Men gravitating toward caregiving occupations may be viewed not just as anomalies but as potential child molesters. Despite beliefs that conceptions of masculinity are changing, recent studies show that men who engaged in nurturant touching of young children were rated as less masculine than men who did not participate in those behaviors. Men in traditionally female occupations take social flack and may be treated as oddities by customers.

Since only 3 to 6 percent of child care workers are male, “they represent the deviant case” and are treated accordingly. When men enter child caregiving occupations, their motives are viewed with suspicion. Are they potential child molesters, or maybe just gay? A field study of male child care workers illustrates the on-the-job difficulties faced by men doing “women’s work.” The study involved interviews of male and female child caregivers at various child care centers. Some thematic patterns and unwritten rules emerged in the treatment of male workers: “in many centers, men are more restricted in their freedom to touch, cuddle, nap, and change diapers for children.” Consider the story of Michael, a male caregiver in a Head Start program. The napping routine at the Head Start center might involve rocking or holding children or rubbing their backs. Every time researcher Susan Murray observed at the center, Michael never participated in napping the children. When she asked the head teacher why Michael was always relegated to lunch cleanup during the napping routine, the head teacher replied, “It’s safer this way. You just never know what the parents might think, what kids might say. We really like Michael, and we’ve always just done it this way.”

Michael’s story is not isolated. At another center, one male caregiver recognized a father’s discomfort in handing his son over to a man and asked that someone else greet that child. Elsewhere, a parent specifically asked that a male child care worker not be allowed to “rub her daughter’s back at nap-time.” Amid fears of potential child abuse accusations and voiced parental suspicions, concerns that children (and male workers) might be suffering real deprivations of intimacy fade into obscurity. Even when they are accepted, men may be treated as tokens and thrust into “manly” roles as substitute daddies in charge of large motor activity. At a child care center
that had just hired a male caregiver, a coworker said, “Oh good, now we’ll have someone to do truck play with the boys.” This pattern of treating male child care workers according to conventional expectations of masculinity, Murray says, “reifies the perception that there is very little that men have to offer children.”

For years, feminists have attacked occupational sex segregation by urging women to break down the barriers into jobs traditionally filled by men. The percentages of women entering and rising in male-dominated professions, social associations, higher educational institutions, and legislatures has slowly but steadily increased. No one has devoted much effort toward encouraging men to cross the gender divide into women’s occupations. The suggestion seems preposterous: why would men want to crash the pink ghetto when they could obtain higher salaries in other lines of work?

Given the current moral and market undervaluation of “women’s work,” perhaps the suggestion does border on the absurd. It is not just about power and money; the pervasive gendering of work goes much deeper than that. Influences from home, school, religion, the economy, prestige, and tradition all shape boys for certain occupations and girls for distinctly other jobs. Only in recent years has it been suggested that men might have an interest in entering nurturing or helping occupations. The idea that men might like or excel at these sorts of jobs is of equally recent vintage.

Of course some males in traditionally female jobs are paid higher salaries than females in comparable positions. For instance, female nurses earn only 95 percent of the amount earned by male nurses with equivalent education and training. This fact might be viewed as undercutting the disadvantage argument, since males can still dominate by entering a traditionally female occupation and taking over. Viewing the evidence this way falls back into the zero-sum game mode of analysis. Many different facets of sex discrimination can coexist. Males as a group can be discriminatorily excluded from certain occupational choices while individual males who do enter traditionally female fields can be discriminatorily overpaid. These threads of sex discrimination intertwine.

Apart from a work culture that nudges men toward traditional occupational choices, men also face gender discrimination for making nontraditional career choices and taking time off from work. Management professors Joy Schneer and Frieda Reitman conducted a study of 713 male and female M.B.A.s, of whom 119 had career interruptions. They found that the employment gaps for women were more likely to be voluntary, most frequently for child rearing, while the gaps for men were more likely to be in-
voluntary, such as company restructuring. Controlling for other income determinants, they found that men who experienced a career gap for whatever reason had incomes that were 21 percent lower than the incomes of men without gaps, while the women’s incomes were only 9 percent lower than the incomes of women without gaps. These results indicate that men may be punished economically for discontinuous employment histories based on gender-specific stereotypes: “Traditionally, women are expected to leave the work force to have and raise families. Women thus possess a socially acceptable reason for being out of the work force that does not relate to competence, but men do not.”

It is almost axiomatic that men dominate the market, while women are relegated to the domestic sphere. What is little acknowledged, though, is the occupational segregation of men. Because of the many economic and social advantages men have accrued, the preclusion of choices for men is a much less visible form of discrimination.

Gender differentiation begins in infancy. In our culture it has led to girls learning nurturing behavior and also passivity, submissiveness, and dependence. Boys are socialized to act aggressively and autonomously, and to achieve. Specific tasks are assigned to members of each sex, and various social activities—from housework to sports to occupations—are considered principally the domain of one sex but not the other. Crossing traditional gender lines is viewed as a violation of cultural norms.

Some sex researchers have demonstrated statistically significant sex-related differences in attitudes, behavioral tendencies, and social actions. While there is considerable confirmation that the sexes exhibit differences in behaviors, attitudes, and actions, the evidence is overwhelming that these social behaviors are not solely, and not even primarily, the product of biological sex differences. On the contrary, the most powerful evidence is that gendering is largely a social construct. Much of the biosocial research points toward the conclusion that on the whole, similarities between the sexes are more pronounced than differences, there is greater variability between individuals of the same sex than between the sexes, and socially created gender differences abound.

Even to the extent that some facets of sex differences have biological roots, we build on these differences socially. Individuals are sculpted by their environments, and traditional stereotypes play a large role in constructing gender. The emphasis on differences between girls and boys and women and men can reinforce gender stereotypes. Boys and girls are ex-
pected to act in prescribed ways in accordance with their genders. At least in part to receive approval, children will conform to gender role expectations; they will behave in ways that are expected of them. And the match between beliefs about the propriety of gender roles, behavioral expectations of others, and the development of gender role–congruent social skills creates a cycle of gender role reinforcement. Gender differences between females and males will repeatedly manifest because they are expected, taught, adopted, and then displayed in social behaviors. Gender thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We live in a culture that celebrates differences—and looks for them. Society continually trains its members in the recognition of differences. Our culture holds deep beliefs in the existence of a natural order. Biology easily becomes the uncritical justification for discrimination.

For those areas at the margins where some sex-based differences exist, the social question remains: do those modest statistical differences justify presumptive differences in treatment of women and men? The nature-nurture debate will not be resolved scientifically during our lifetimes, if ever. Thus, what we face is really a different set of questions. Of what significance are the social differences between the sexes, and, in the face of uncertainty about whether sex differences are biological or social in origin—whether they are hardwired—how should we behave toward gender differences? The idea of difference itself is a social construct. Whether gender differences are innate or cultural or, most probably, some combination of the two, we still must make distinctly social choices about the labels we attach to those differences and the significance we give them. The labeling process—the part that occurs through the passage of laws and the crafting of legal decisions—is the subject of the next chapter.