CHAPTER 1

Developing a Critical Gender/Sex Lens

No doubt about it, in the United States and many other parts of the world, gender in communication is a hot topic. You can turn on a television or radio almost any day of the week and hear some version of the following: A woman complains that her husband never listens to her, then another person complains that the women she or he works with gossip and are not to be trusted; finally, audience members or experts react with recognition of these anecdotal experiences and readily diagnose them as examples of common “gender communication problems.” Given most people’s ability to generate such a seemingly obvious explanation, you may wonder whether you even need a course on gender in communication. After all, you have been engaging in and observing gendered communication practices all your life.

Popular assumptions abound regarding gender differences between the sexes such as the ones just mentioned. Research suggests, however, that women and men alike use gossip to build group solidarity; it’s just that society usually does not derogatively label men’s talk as gossip (Coates, 1996; Pilkington, 1998). Similarly, researchers suggest that differences in listening are likely influenced by socialization more than by biology (Johnson, Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 2000). Researchers find that the listening goals of women and men tend to be influenced by socialization toward masculine or feminine stereotypical preferences in terms of what captures their attention. As with the sexist labeling of gossip, people tend to expect the listening goals and abilities of women and men to differ more than has actually been documented by research.

A key point in this text is that, more than actual differences in communication patterns, perceptions of women’s and men’s behaviors are gendered. In Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children, and Our Jobs (2004), psychologist Rosalind Barnett and journalist Caryl Rivers critique social
myths of gender differences. They and others compellingly argue that the predominant cultural belief in gender differences has created a self-fulfilling prophecy in which people’s beliefs actually create the differences.

To say that most gender and sex differences are socially created rather than purely biological does not mean that no differences exist or that the perceived differences do not matter. According to the research gathered and analyzed for this book, there are many, often subtle, nuances in behavior and experience tied to gender, one’s psychological identity (feminine and masculine), and sex, one’s biological identity (genitals, hormones, and chromosomes). This is partly why, in this text, we refer to gender/sex. Ask parents who are struggling to raise their children in less gender-specific ways. Many will likely tell you that the differences, whether biologically or socially constructed or both, are real to them. No matter how hard the parents try, some children cling to gender-specific identities and related sex stereotypes. Similarly, as you will learn in this chapter, scientists have found no dependable biological markers of race—yet members of society continue to construct and employ racial identities, sometimes to prejudge others and sometimes as a way to name and celebrate group identity. Unfortunately, people who are labeled African American, Muslim, Chicana, woman, and so forth, often face discrimination solely on the basis of placement in that category. The experiences of difference and discrimination are interconnected and real, whether or not they are biologically false.

Because of these issues, the approach we take in this book is not to merely summarize current research on the topic but to go a step further and attempt to equip you with the critical analytical tools to develop your own informed opinions about society’s gender expectations, about existing research, and about prevailing cultural views, as well as about future research needs. To do that, it is necessary to understand the ways in which predominant cultural views about gender and sex create a gendered lens through which people view reality. This lens can become so embedded that a person doesn’t realize how it might limit her or his perceptions of reality. In place of the predominant culture’s gendered lens, we hope to help you construct a more critical gendered lens by providing analytical tools with which you can examine common assumptions about gender, sex, and communication.

In this chapter, we first take on the question of why it is important to examine how gender is communicated. A big part of the answer is tied to unpacking prevalent popular cultural messages about gender, as in the foregoing examples. We then define and examine some basic vocabulary used throughout this text, to help equip the reader with the critical tools we find useful for this closer examination. Because these terms are so interrelated, we necessarily use some terms before we have an opportunity to define them. If you come to a concept that is unfamiliar to you, read on.

**Gender Differences: A Cultural Obsession**

Popular culture portrays gender as a series of “differences,” often more dramatically presented as “gender wars” between the sexes. Out of curiosity, we searched the
Internet using the key words “gender wars.” During the last year, the phrase appeared 70 times in the 50 major English-language papers indexed by LexisNexis. A Google search generated more than 10,700,000 hits. The term gender wars is used to frame discussions about health, education, business, marriage, sexuality, child care, brain structure, the military, war, sexual harassment, athletics, computer use, emotions, acting, toilet seat norms, computer marketing, clothing, and even camping equipment. The “gender wars” are a primary topic for joke lists, and there is even a downloadable game called Gender Wars.

We probably do not have to tell you, as communication students, that words matter. However, even as people recognize the importance of communication, they sometimes are unaware of its influence on them. Metaphors, in particular, can be especially influential because they frame thinking about an issue even when people do not realize they are using metaphors. Metaphors become dead metaphors because they are no longer recognized as overt metaphors; instead, they come to denote what they are used to describe. According to the metaphor categories created by linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (1980), gender wars is a structural metaphor, meaning that the phrase structures one concept in terms of another: Gender relations = war. Structural metaphors often are extended by a series of additional metaphors stemming from the initial equation, as in “the latest skirmish in the war between the sexes” (Blustain, 2000, p. 42). If one thinks of gender and sex relations as a constant battle, with casualties, assigned sides, enemies, and weapons, the ultimate goals of surrender or annihilation become inherent.

The war metaphor is not a coincidence. It reinforces differences and highlights opposition. The assumption is that there are two very different views of reality, with sides assigned at birth, and they conflict. As in actual wartime, both sides use propaganda to demonize the enemy. Thus, women often are demonized as being relationally demanding, emotionally unstable, and needy. Men are often demonized as being withdrawn, unemotional, and aggressive. With contradictory descriptions such as these, gender wars seem inevitable and never ending.

Although it is true that the gender wars metaphor sometimes is used humorously to poke fun at women and men, this humor is actually part of the metaphor’s power. It helps to popularize the metaphor of gender wars and render it seemingly innocuous. This humor is harmful, as well, because it can trivialize real issues of sexual violence, such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and rape.

It is important to examine the ways in which this view of gender and sex as oppositional, pitting women and men against each other, limits an understanding of the issues involved. Imagine, instead, if the popular metaphor of gender relations were gender union (as in European Union, workers’ unions, student unions, the United Nations, the United States). How might predominant depictions of women’s and men’s communication differ from what is typically reported? Indeed, although the predominant culture continues to assume that women and men are extremely different and therefore communicate in different ways, actual research does not support such a clear distinction (Anderson & Leaper, 1998; Edwards & Hamilton, 2004; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004; Yaeger-Dror, 1998). Research
suggests that gendered behavior variances among women and among men are actually greater than those between women and men (Hyde & Plant, 1995; Wood & Dindia, 1998). Think about it. Why would anyone assume that all women or all men around the world and across ethnic groups and through the generations communicate the same way?

Interestingly, as researchers continually disprove the existence of generic gender differences, media and popular culture seem to spread the myth of difference even more pervasively. It seems to be a message many people want to hear. The magnetism of this simplistic view is incredibly compelling. Why might this be so?

First, sex and gender are primary social categories in most cultures. When a child is born, what is the first question most people in the United States ask? It is not about weight, length, hair color, or even whether the baby and mother are healthy. Instead, people ask, “Is it a boy or a girl?” From then on, they tend to talk about, interact with, and dress the infant accordingly. It is no surprise, then, that one of the first things toddlers learn about their identities is whether they are categorized as girls or boys. Society sexes and genders infants based on their genitals, under the assumption that there are only two sexes and two corresponding genders. In Western cultures, since the 1900s pink has been designated for girls and blue for boys. Many a parent won’t dress an infant in the color designated for the other sex for fear that people will misidentify the sex of the child, as if such a mistake would be a horrible embarrassment.

The preference for a male firstborn remains true for many in Western cultures. In other parts of the world, such as Papua New Guinea, Tamil Nadu in India, and some areas of rural China, the cultural and economic bias toward boy children sadly still leads to the infanticide of girl babies or to orphanages filled with them. Tradition allows only boy children to carry on the family name; thus, boys also inherit the family assets and, with their future wives, provide for their aging parents. Girl children are often expected to marry, to provide dowries upon marriage, and to care for their husbands’ families. Given this, it becomes more understandable why boys still may be preferred. Lest you think the preoccupation with babies’ sexes has dissipated in the United States, a new test was released in the U.S. market in June 2005. The Baby Gender Mentor determines the sex of a fetus as early as five weeks after conception. This test has caused serious concern among bioethicists, who fear it will be used for sex selection purposes (Goldberg, 2005).

Second, the assumption of difference is tied to the assumption of heterosexual romance. It is not a coincidence that popular self-help literature links gender/sex
differences to heterosexual relations (DeFrancisco & O'Connor, 1995). Communication scholar Robert Hopper, who studied gender and talk for 30 years, concludes that the cultural belief that everyone should be in a heterosexual relationship feeds into the focus on gender differences (Hopper, 2003). Early on, boys and girls are encouraged to see each other as the “opposite sex” and to vie for the other’s attention. Heterosexual dating is a primary means to popularity for many in U.S. middle and high schools. And heterosexual weddings are seen as the ultimate social rituals (Ingraham, 1999), so much so that states are moving rapidly to amend their constitutions to bar marriage among gays and lesbians.

Whether or not one accepts alternative forms of romantic relations, the focus on heterosexual relations and the presumption that oppositional gender/sex differences exist combine to create expectations that everyone should be in such relationships, thereby decreasing the value of other types of platonic or romantic relationships.

Third, in Western capitalistic cultures, sex, differences, and conquest sell. When popular writers, television directors, and advertisers put the word sex in their presentations, sales and ratings go up. People are immediately interested and want to hear or read more. If emphasis were placed on recognizing the ways in which the sexes are similar, as in the gender union metaphor, there would be no challenge, no mystery, no threat. As we live in a culture in which heterosexual romantic relations are stressed so much, an interesting question to ask is why authors and the media do not focus more on identifying and celebrating the similarities between women and men. This omission is very telling about the predominant culture and its political tools.

Fourth, the focus on difference is political. It helps reinforce the notion that women and men are different, that women and men are in a series of “gender wars” with each other, and that women and men will never understand each other. As noted previously, the problem is that opposites in society are rarely considered different and equal. Rather, the emphasis on differences becomes a tool to mask or justify social inequalities based on race, sex, class, and other social categories (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 2004; DeFrancisco, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). A differences focus leads to portraying one group as deficient and maintaining the other as the norm (Weatherall, 1998).

As linguist Mary Crawford (1995) explains, if communication problems were due solely to differences and not to group power or status, women and men could borrow each other’s styles with similar effectiveness. But in reality, what works depends on the social status of the speaker and the power relations between the speaker and listener. The same communication features do not perform the same for all speakers. A female who adopts a more autocratic style of management may be labeled overbearing, whereas a male manager using this style may be seen as a strong leader.

The negative political effects of presumed differences show up in everyday life. The assumption of presumed differences creates conflicts, persistent inequalities, false expectations, and disappointments. As Barnett and Rivers (2004) explain, “These [differences] theories hurt male-female relationships, undermine equality
in schools and the workplace, adversely affect the division of labor in the home, and deprive our children of the opportunity to develop their full human potential” (p. 2).

In sum, a view of gender/sex as difference is popular, and so people raised in the predominant culture tend to focus on differences rather than similarities. It is as if each member of society wore glasses, and the lenses were refracted so that each person saw gender and sex in a culturally limiting way. What follows is an adjustment in your prescription. The following concepts make clear why a focus on differences between women and men as homogeneous groups is impossible and, in fact, produces inaccurate descriptions of human communication.

A Critical Vocabulary or a New Lens Prescription

Welcome to our view of gender analysis. These are the concepts without which one cannot talk meaningfully about gender, sex, and communication. The vocabulary is grouped into three categories: (1) intersectionality, which is a way to understand the ingredients of cultural identities; (2) communication, which refers to how these identities are constructed, maintained, and changed; and (3) systems of hierarchy, which refers to the social structures of oppression. You will find that we have not provided simple dictionary definitions for these terms but rather indicate why these concepts deserve critical analysis and must be discussed in relationship to each other.

Intersectionality

Writing a book about only gender in communication is impossible. So, we need to explain what we have written. Gender is not the only thing that influences communication patterns, whether in interpersonal, group, or public settings. One’s identity and how one expresses it are determined by a number of intersecting factors. African American feminists were among the first to recognize this. They developed the theory of intersectionality to explain how gender is not a separate part of identity but is related to all other parts of a person’s identity.

Legal scholar and critical race feminist Adrien Wing (1997) explains the theory of intersectionality as the notion that identity is “multiplicative” rather than additive (p. 30). Instead of understanding identity as the addition of one element on top of another, as in woman + White + heterosexual + second-generation citizen, and so forth, identity makes more sense if you think of each identity element as inextricably linked with another, as in woman × White × heterosexual × second-generation citizen. All facets of identity are integral, interlocking parts of a whole. What it means to be a woman or a man influences one’s class, which influences one’s race, which influences one’s gender, which influences one’s nationality, and vice versa. In other words, you cannot understand what it means to have a certain gender/sex without examining these other identities simultaneously.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a lawyer and legal scholar, was the first to use the word intersectionality (1989). She explains, “because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into
account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black Women are subordinated” (p. 59). However, one should remember that “it is not just the marginalized who have a gender, race, and so on” (Harding, 1995, p. 121). Intersectionality explains the complexity of all people’s identities. And just as any analysis of subordination relating to gender in communication is incomplete without taking one’s multiple identities into account, so, too, is any analysis of empowerment.

Research that assumes that a person’s identity exists in removable, separable layers leads to overgeneralized conclusions. Such research does not recognize that identity actually occurs as a complex, synergistic, infused whole that becomes something completely different when parts are ignored, forgotten, and unnamed (Collins, 1998). Author Audre Lorde (1984) offers an example of why the intersectional approach is also important to the individual:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present that as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as a part of my living. (p.120)

Lorde’s use of the metaphor ingredients is quite apt when explaining intersectionality. For example, a cake is an object with ingredients such as flour, eggs, oil, sugar, and milk, which can exist separately from each other. The combined result contains all the ingredients, but none are recognizable in their separate forms. A cake is not just flour and eggs and sugar and oil and milk. A cake is only a cake when the ingredients are so fused together that they cannot be separated again.

An intersectional approach allows scholars to avoid falling into the trap of overgeneralization, such as in biological determinism. This trap is the belief that, because a person is born a female or a male, or of one race rather than another, she or he has some predetermined, essential, or innate characteristics. Another related overgeneralization is essentialism, the presumption that all members of a group are alike because they have one quality in common, such as when one attempts to speak about all men’s communication, or Black women’s communication, or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered) communication, or any identity element’s role in communication. Author Angela Harris (1997) advocates the avoidance of essentialism, explaining that “fragmentation of identity and essentialism go hand in hand” (p. 11). One cannot study a person as if her or his gender or sex or race exclusively defined the person completely. To do so risks essentializing and stereotyping.

Intersectional identity theories do not absolutely reject the existence of identity categories and the social reality they produce, nor do they celebrate identity politics with
an uncritical acceptance of identity categories. Instead, they embrace what sociologist Leslie McCall terms the “intracategorical approach to complexity” that “seeks to complicate and use [identity categories] in a more critical way” (2005, p. 1780). Like McCall, in this text we seek to “focus on the process by which they [categories of identity] are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life” (p. 1783).

**Gender and Sex, Gender/Sex**

In the late 1970s, researchers started using the term *gender* instead of *sex* to identify attributes of women and men (Unger, 1979). This was heralded as an important breakthrough for research and for human rights. No longer were authors essentializing all men as acting one way and all women another based solely on their genitals. In contrast, *gender* refers to one’s self-identity—that is, how much a person associates herself or himself with the masculine or the feminine or both, as prescribed by society. Because the characteristic is cultural rather than biological, the assumption is that a person can identify to varying degrees with masculinity and femininity, rather than just one or the other.

However, the attributes of masculinity and femininity are drawn from predominant cultural assumptions and expectations, replacing one set of generalizations based on sex with another based on gender. You can probably name these attributes easily. Masculine characteristics include independence, strength, and decisiveness. Feminine characteristics are typically considered the opposite (although most people do not openly acknowledge that “the opposite” means that femininity includes dependency, weakness, and irrationality). In a more positive light, femininity is also recognized as compassionate, supportive, and relationship oriented (e.g., Bem, 1974; Gilligan, 1982).

Although similarities in the definitions of masculinity and femininity emerge across many cultures of the world, surveys show that cultures differ in terms of how much each is valued (Hofstede, 1998). Cultures also differ in terms of how their current notions of masculinity and femininity emerged historically. In the United States, current conceptions of these terms primarily evolved out of the Western Industrial Revolution, beginning in the mid-18th century. Paid productivity left the home, and women’s and men’s work became dichotomized. White men mostly claimed the better-paying jobs outside the home in business and government. It was assumed that White men were more inclined to have the skills the work demanded: leadership ability, assertiveness, physical strength, and independence. In contrast, the home was popularly heralded as women’s domain and area of expertise. The work there demanded caretaking, supportiveness, empathy, and a relational focus. Heterosexual nuclear families were emphasized more than they had been previously, and women became more economically dependent on men.

Before this time, women and men tended to share more of the tasks of productivity and caretaking in their homes (Cancian, 1989). Today, people see gender roles changing before their eyes as more U.S. men than ever are choosing to be stay-at-home dads, and more girls and women than ever are participating in athletics, including professional athletics (Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Coontz, 1997).
This history demonstrates not only that the meanings of masculinity and femininity change over time and thus are not innate but also that they are influenced by a predominantly White, capitalistic marketplace. The concepts were never neutral or free of social influences. They prescribed who should do what work and thus who should have what personal qualities, creating an artificial split between women’s and men’s abilities and lives. Women and children who were African American, immigrants, or poor Whites did not share this history. Because of slavery, prejudice, and poverty, women and men from these groups have always worked outside the home in positions in housekeeping, food preparation, and factories and as sexual laborers (Andersen, 2006; Burn, 2000).

Although focusing on gender instead of sex was meant to be a step away from overgeneralizing women’s and men’s identities, masculinity and femininity are still stereotypes, prescribing how women and men are supposed to behave. In the United States, the stereotypes are based on White, heterosexual, upper-class standards. This explains an ethical dilemma in studying gender. By putting the focus there, we risk reifying the stereotypes (Young, 1997). Intersectionality is a useful tool to help address this dilemma.

The term androgyny emerged with the concept of gender in the 1970s. It was expected to be another step toward equality of the sexes. Psychologist Sandra Bem (1974) used the term, which combines two Greek words: andros, meaning “male,” and gyne, meaning “female.” Bem developed a questionnaire called the Sex-Role Inventory (SRI) to identify a person’s gender orientation as highly feminine, highly masculine, androgyous (both), or undifferentiated (low in both masculine and feminine traits). Persons who are androgyous are said to have more behavioral flexibility. Although the concept of behavioral flexibility certainly seems admirable and is consistent with the flexibility needed to be a competent communicator, the concept of androgyny is still limiting.

Researchers who use the Sex-Role Inventory are limiting descriptions of persons according to the two stereotypic concepts of masculinity and femininity, or are engaging in what some refer to as a gender binary—a system having two distinct and exclusive genders. Androgyny merely collapses the two stereotypes together and thus inadvertently helps to maintain them. Because of this criticism, in recent use of the SRI, researchers have dropped the terms masculine and feminine, relying instead on measures of dominance, nurturance, orientation toward self versus others, and so forth, but the stereotypical inferences are still present. There is no ideal means to study gender identity.

To add to this problem, researchers often do not use the concept of gender correctly. If you read the research, you will find that many claim to have found gender differences or similarities, when in actuality they never assessed the participants’ self-identities. They merely asked participants to label themselves as biologically female or male.

This blurring of sex and gender concepts raises another question. The longtime distinction between sex (as a biological given) and gender (as a social construction) may not be as clear as once thought. Judith Butler (1993), a professor of rhetoric and comparative literature, argues that sex is as much a cultural creation as gender.
and that bodies have no meaning separate from the meaning language gives them. She identifies the belief that there are only two sexes as one of the most vivid examples of this linguistic framing of bodies. This belief does not recognize intersexed persons.

*Intersexuality* is the term used to describe a person who has ambiguous or non-congruent sex features. *Ambiguous* means that the person has mixed genitalia of females and males. *Noncongruent* or *transgender* means that the person feels that her or his biological sex and genitalia do not match her or his gender identity. Lest you think these are extremely rare medical phenomena, consider that “recent medical literature indicates that approximately one to four percent of the world’s population may be intersexed” (Greenberg, 1999, pp. 267–268). One percent translates into 2.7 million people in the United States. Four percent would translate into approximately 10 million people in the United States. Despite this, the very way society talks and legislates about sex in the United States constantly reinforces the idea that there are two and only two distinct sexes. Law professor Julie Greenberg (1999) explains how this works:

Implicit in legislation utilizing the terms “sex” and “gender” are the assumptions that only two biological sexes exist and that all people fit neatly into either the category male or female. In other words, despite medical and anthropological studies to the contrary, the law presumes a binary sex and gender model. The law ignores the millions of people who are intersexed. A binary sex paradigm does not reflect reality. Instead, sex and gender range across a spectrum. Male and female occupy the two ends of the poles, and a number of intersexed conditions exist between the two poles. (p. 275)

One’s understanding of the body and its relationship to identity is always mediated by language, the words each person uses to talk about the body, and therefore one can never comprehend the biological entity without the meanings language attaches to it. In Butler’s (1993) terms, “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (p. 10). The notion that our so-called biological sex is itself influenced by communication is not to deny the existence of a material body, “but to insist that our apprehension of it, our understanding of it, is necessarily mediated by the contexts in which we speak” (Price & Shildrick, 1999, p. 7). When the predominant culture calls a body a particular sex, male or female (and nothing else), the culture has already engaged in an act of communication that has “normative force,” as it recognizes some parts of a person but not all (Butler, 1993, p. 11).

It is important to understand that the terms *sex* and *gender* refer to different aspects of the self but are deeply interrelated. A simple example should demonstrate this point. Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2005) conducted an exhaustive study of human beings’ bones, a part of the body you would think would be most biological and least cultural. In an attempt to answer the question, “How does experience shape the very bones that support us?” (p. 1495), she explores the way osteoporosis was identified and treated. Her discovery shows: “Osteoporosis is a
condition that reveals all of the problems of defining sex apart from gender" (p. 1499); in fact, the widely held belief that women are more susceptible to osteoporosis depends on “how we define osteoporosis, in which human populations (and historical periods) we gather statistics, and what portions of the life cycle we compare” (p. 1500). The differences between men's and women's bones may not be as different as first thought. “Our bodies physically imbibe culture” (p. 1495).

In another example, men's studies scholar R. W. Connell (1995) argues that men cannot escape their bodies. The social significance placed on men’s bodies as large, strong, and agile heavily influence many men's gender identities. The struggles many transgendered persons experience with self-acceptance and social acceptance illustrate the undeniable relationship between mind and body.

Accordingly, we want to recognize that people experience their gender and sex together. By using the phrase gender/sex in this textbook, we are able to constantly emphasize the cultural interrelations of the concepts of gender and sex. When we discuss gender in communication, we always discuss sex in communication, because communication that is about gender, that is influenced by gender, and that differentiates gender also always is about sex, is influenced by sex, and differentiates sex.

**Sexuality**

One's identity as a gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, or transgendered person is also often confounded with the terms gender and sex. Part of the confusion is due to social stereotypes: Gays are assumed to be effeminate, lesbians are assumed to be masculine, and so on. But sexual orientation is not the same as gender or sex. Sexual orientation refers to whether one is physically and romantically attracted to or has sex with persons of the same sex, the other sex, or both (as in the case of bisexuals).

However, sexuality is more than orientation. It also involves what one does when one is sexual. Even those who might be labeled heterosexuals can be queer, meaning they may not abide by heteronormative sex practices. Heteronormativity describes the way in which, in the United States, social institutions and policies reinforce the presumption that people are heterosexual, that gender and sex are binaries. It is important to note, however, that challenges to heteronormativity are not challenges to all norms. As English professor Michael Warner explains (2002), “To be against processes of normalization is not to be afraid of ordinariness. Nor is it to advocate the ‘life without limit’” (p. 197).

Our goal is to make clear the distinctions between sex, gender, and sexual orientation as we discuss sexuality, recognizing that each affects the other. The way culture communicates about sexual orientation constructs and maintains not only differences but heterosexuality as the norm (Rich, 1980). Persons who are discriminated against because of their sexual orientation are not being oppressed simply because they are behaving as “bad women or men”; they are also being discriminated against because they are perceived as sexual deviants (Rubin, 1984). Sociologist Gayle Rubin (1984) states, “The system of sexual oppression cuts across other modes of sexual inequality, such as racial, class, ethnic or gendered
inequality, and it sorts individuals and groups according to its own intrinsic dynamics. It is not reducible (p. 22). Conversely, discussions of gender and sex are intricately tied to sexual orientation and sexuality.

**RACE AND ETHNICITY**

As the concept of intersectionality suggests, one cannot adequately study gender without studying race and ethnicity. Like gender/sex, race in particular is a primary social category used to identify people. Like the other social identifiers discussed in this chapter, race and ethnicity are largely constructed through words and actions.

Most scientists long ago abandoned the idea of using race as a valid indicator for categorizing human beings. Races do not exist in the biological sense, and there is extensive research to suggest that “purely” distinct races never did exist (Orbe & Harris, 2001, p. 31). More genetic variations occur within groups of people than between them (Tobin & Dusheck, 1998). However, in daily life, people tend to identify a person’s race by examining a few physical traits, such as skin color, hair texture, eye color, and the shape of eyes and nose. Groups of people do vary in these physical appearances from one geographic area to another, but when these physical traits are looked at together, researchers find no consistent identifiers shared within a group of people. The huge variances within a group of people mean, for example, that persons who are considered White can have darker skins than some persons who are labeled Black.

*Ethnicity* refers to a group of people who share a cultural history, even though they may no longer live in the same geographic area (Zack, 1998). They may share values, a language, and a way of life. Race and ethnicity are generally seen as connected. In the United States, people within a given ethnic group tend to be identified as the same race, with origins in the same geographic area. But the link between race and ethnicity is becoming less predictable as the world becomes more transnational. Although most Jewish people are considered White, many are Black; French people are expected to be White, yet many are Black. Furthermore, both race and ethnic labels are subject to cultural change. Germans and Italians are now considered White, but this was not always so. In 1751, U.S. founding leader Benjamin Franklin wrote of his fear that the Germans would take over Pennsylvania and how they would “Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion” (para. 23). Similarly, immigrants of the early 1900s from Ireland, Italy, Russia, and Spain were generally thought of as “colored” until the 1960s (Martin & Nakayama, 2004).

Additionally, the intersections between races often are ignored. Even though racial purity is a myth, when you fill out forms, you often are asked to identify yourself as one race and only one race. Not until the year 2000 did the U.S. census allow people to identify themselves as belonging to more than one racial category. Individuals and social institutions, such as government census takers, accept the biological fiction of race and continue to use it to classify people.

Consequently, we cannot offer a precise definition of race in this text. At its simplest, race is a way in which groups of people are socially identified. When society
constructs arbitrary racial categories, these categories are rarely different and equal. Rather, race has been used as a primary tool of social oppression. In the United States, fair skin is socially preferred, even among many African Americans and Mexican Americans. A fairer-skinned person of color is more likely to be perceived as attractive and successful than is a person of darker skin (hooks, 1995). This bias toward Whiteness is spreading as a result of the globalization of Western values, products, and images (Lont, 2001). For example, in Japan and China, women’s magazines carry advertisements for products to whiten the skin. Whiteness has become the norm to which all other racial identities are compared, and the comparisons are rarely different and equal.

This central position of Whiteness allows it to become normalized to the extent that most White persons do not even realize their race is a cultural category. They can readily list stereotypes of other races of peoples, such as the expectation that Asians should be smart and that African Americans should be good at sports, but they have difficulty naming a quality that applies to their whole race.

Racism and violence prevention educator Paul Kivel (2002) argues that Whiteness is “a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being White” (p. 15). Kivel’s approach is consistent with that of communication scholars Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1999). They identify six cultural norms that form a “strategic rhetoric of whiteness” (p. 96) that maintains White privilege: Whiteness is closely tied to power or status, Whiteness is the norm, Whiteness is natural, Whiteness is indicative of nationality and citizenship, Whiteness is beyond the necessity of racial identity labels, and Whites are descendants of White European ancestry.

When race is conceptualized as natural rather than as culturally created, the conceptualization helps hide the power of this category. In particular, it is important to recognize Whiteness and the strategies of Whiteness in the study of gender, because if one does not, race remains a concern only for non-Whites, and gender, when studied alone, remains implicitly an identity owned solely by Whites.

Throughout this book, we capitalize the words Black and White to clarify that we are referring to racial categories and the politics of skin color rather than to hues on the color wheel. Authors often use other terms, such as Northern European and Euramerican to refer to Whites and African Americans to refer to Blacks. We, too, will use the more specific term African American where relevant or when used by an author we are quoting, but we feel that Northern European does not clearly indicate the White race, because, as noted, Blacks can also be born in Northern Europe.

**National Identity**

As the foregoing examples illustrate, national identity also is linked to race and ethnicity. Interdisciplinary feminist scholars have begun to explore how national cultural identities are gendered/sexed and how citizens tend to experience their national rights differently based on gender/sex (e.g., Enloe, 1989; Mayer, 2000;
Yuval-Davis, 1997). Theorists posit that “control over access to the benefits of belonging to the nation is virtually always gendered” and that “the ability to define the nation lies mainly with men” (Mayer, 2000, p. 2).

This means that, ideally, national identities should be included in the study of gender/sex. Gender and national identity are related, not just for persons in economically disadvantaged countries or in countries with more visible internal violence, but for U.S. citizens, too (Mayer, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). And it means that gender/sex issues happening around the world are extremely relevant to this study. Placing the study of gender in the context of national identity prevents an overgeneralized gender differences approach that assumes universal differences between women and men or, worse yet, assumes that research primarily conducted in the United States represents gendered lives around the world. Gender and ethnic studies scholar Nira Yuval-Davis (1999) explains, “Essentialist notions of difference . . . are very different from the notions of difference promoted by those of us who believe in the importance of incorporating notions of difference into democracy. In the first case notions of difference replace notions of equality—in the second case they encompass it” (p. 131). Including analyses of national identities is an important part of creating a gender diversity approach to the study of gender/sex in communication.

When national identity is included in the study of gender, the focus has usually been on the citizens of economically disadvantaged countries. The influence of the United States as a nation has not been a primary focus in gender in communication research. Instead, most of the research has focused on the one-to-one relationship level, as if it existed independently of national identity.

One way feminist scholars have attempted to talk about the mix of race, gender/sex, economic, and national privilege is to refer to the North and the South. North tends to refer to countries in Europe and North America, which tend to share economies developed on the capitalist model. South tends to refer to countries in Africa, Central, South America, and South and Southeast Asia, the economies of which are not considered developed according to the capitalist model. North and South are not meant to refer to geographic areas as much as to economic, racial, and nationality issues. Thus, for example, even though Australia is geographically located in the Southern hemisphere, it is considered part of the North.

The phrase developed country often is used as a synonym for North, and developing country is used as a synonym for South. We will try not to use developed and developing as designators, because they tend to imply that the North is farther along the evolutionary path than the South, and they fail to recognize the limits of economic development (see Esteva, 1992; Latouche, 1993). We use it on occasion, however, for lack of a better term. Similarly, East and West are used to refer to a mix of ethnicity, religion, culture, and geography. West tends to refer to the same nations as does North, although the connotation of West has less to do with economics and more to do with culture. West tends to refer to those nations that are predominantly Christian, capitalist, European, and North American. East refers to those countries of Asia and the Middle East that tend to be non-Christian, predominantly Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Shinto, Sikh, and Taoist. Middle East tends
to refer to those countries that are predominantly Muslim. Like North and South, East and West are geographic fictions, as there are no absolute east and west on a globe. After all, Japan and China are west of California.

### Socioeconomic Class

Politicians and media refer to social class all the time, but it is difficult to provide a succinct definition of this concept. Usually, people use it to refer to income. In the United States, the upper class is the wealthiest, the lower class is the poorest, and the middle class is somewhere in between. The exact income levels of each change with the economy, and class distinctions are clearly different in other countries. Although there is no set definition of middle class, in the United States it usually refers to those whose pretax income is between $25,000 and $75,000. A person defined as middle class in the United States would be extremely wealthy in other parts of the world where a middle class may not even exist. However, income alone does not adequately define class. Neither do education level nor profession, yet they are a part of the concept. For example, a person with a graduate degree may be making only minimum wage.

One’s social class includes predominant cultural ideologies, values, beliefs, and ways of viewing the world. For example, middle-class people in the United States are expected to value affluence and strive for its material markers, such as nice homes, cars, toys, and travel. Many have extreme credit card debt yet may still be considered middle class according to income, education, job, or material possessions.

Perhaps because social class is difficult to define, the field of communication studies has been slow to examine the ways in which it may affect communication. However, research in women’s studies and intersectional analyses has shown that social class is important to include in the study of gender. Distinct class experiences influence how people perform gender. For example, historian Glenna R. Matthews (1992) explains how working-class women were able to enter the public realm as labor activists more easily than upper-class women because they were already present in the economic sphere. Economic necessity required them to work and hence to violate the social demands of the time that White women remain domestic. The additional violation of being politically active presented no unique violation of gender/sex expectations. As a result, the history of labor activism is replete with women leaders: Mary Harris “Mother” Jones (Tonn, 1996), Emma Goldman (Kowal, 1996; Solomon, 1987), Voltairine de Cleyre (Palczewski, 1995), and Lucy Parsons (Horwitz, 1998).

Class affects not only how gender is performed but also how gender/sex is perceived. Classism is discrimination toward persons of lower socioeconomic class. Men of lower classes face the stereotype that they are less intelligent, immoral, and prone to criminality. Women of lower classes are stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, easily duped, and dependent on state assistance. This discrimination and related stereotypes help maintain separation and oppression (Ehrenreich, 1990), which can be multiplied by oppressions due to racism, sexism, and so on.

In sum, our attention to the intersectionality of identities and oppressions is meant to highlight the way cultural identities and inequalities are embedded in
political systems and social structures, not only in people. Philosopher Sandra Harding (1995) explains that sexual and racial inequalities “are not caused by prejudice—by individual bad attitudes and false beliefs.” In fact, she believes that focusing on “prejudice as the cause of racial (or gender, class, or sexual) inequality tends to lodge responsibility for racism on already economically disadvantaged whites.” It keeps the focus on individuals rather than on the larger culture in which their attitudes were created. Clearly, prejudice does contribute to racism, sexism, and other forms of inequity, but Harding argues that people should view inequalities as “fundamentally a political relationship” that manifests itself through cultural strategies or norms that privilege some groups over others (p. 122).

**Communication**

In contrast to many communication texts that implicitly focus on a sender–receiver model of communication, we focus on the central role communication plays in the construction of meaning and consequently in the construction, maintenance, and change of social identities such as gender/sex. This much broader view of communication lends itself to a more interdisciplinary approach. The social construction approach to communication is why the textbook focuses on “gender in communication” rather than on “gender and communication” (Taylor, personal correspondence, January 2003). *Communicating Gender Diversity* locates gender within the communication process. Instead of examining how gender influences communication, we explore how communication creates gender (Rakow, 1986). This statement is not meant to deny possible biological influences but to put a spotlight on the profound role communication plays in the construction of gender/sex identities. To say that gender is socially constructed clarifies that it does not simply exist on the individual level. Rather, it is a system of meaning constructed through interactions that govern access to power and resources (Crawford, 1995).

“Communication creates gender” is a simple statement, but it holds other important implications. Individual gender identities and cultural assumptions about gender can and do change over time, and each individual plays a role in maintaining and changing gender constructions. Each person, therefore, can play a role in bringing about gender/sex equality.

A communication studies approach provides a unique vantage point for studying gender/sex. It views gender as dynamic and ever changing, informed by multiple perspectives and experiences. This approach avoids essentializing gender because it treats gender as a verb, not a noun. Gender is a process, not a thing. Accordingly, this book examines how people “do” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) or “perform” (Butler, 1990a) gender.

Thinking of gender as a system of meaning constructed through communication rather than as merely an individual attribute allows one to study the effects of gender on at least three communication levels: individual, interpersonal, and societal (Crawford, 1995, pp. 13–17). At the individual or intrapersonal communication level, persons develop gendered identities through the interactions of biology, personality, and internalized social expectations. To varying degrees, they come to
see themselves as masculine, feminine, or both. They internalize messages of privilege, status, inferiority, or subordination and behave in ways that help to create, maintain, or change them.

At the interpersonal communication level, persons influence each other’s gender identities through their interactions with each other. For example, parents who treat young children in stereotypical gendered ways, such as protecting girls and pushing boys, can influence the development of their children’s gender identities. Such treatment can encourage self-fulfilling prophecies about gender, self-confidence, physical ability, and more.

In the United States, at the societal level, White men as a social group still dominate most social institutions, such as business, politics, law, health, and academics. Although the statistics are changing, the reason for the domination is not that more White men are in these fields (they are not). Rather, the norms of these fields tend to be based on White, masculine values. This generally privileges the White men who perform their gender in a way that fits the norms of such masculinity. It does not mean that all individual White men intentionally oppress others. Gender/sex implications are contained within the systems or structures. This is why we dedicate the second half of the textbook to a close analysis of the ways in which primary social institutions contribute to the construction of gender/sex—both in terms of imposing gender expectations and in terms of liberating persons from them.

Gender identity and experiences are not affected by one of these three communication levels at a time; rather, one experiences them simultaneously. For example, rape is a crime of power and domination. A person who is attacked experiences the crime on all three levels. It is an attack on the individual, it is an attack on an interpersonal level, and it is an attack that tends to happen to women because of the social system of masculine domination and communication forms that normalize sexual violence. The phrase from the 1960s women’s movement, “The personal is political,” refers to this interaction of levels. What happens to people on a personal level is inherently tied to social norms supported by political structures.

Rhetoric. As we examine the societal level and the larger discourse formations that happen there, an understanding of rhetoric is essential. The study of rhetoric enables explorations of how gender/sex influences the way individuals engage in public rhetoric and how public rhetoric genders/sexes individuals. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the discovery of the available means of persuasion in any given situation. Other scholars have advanced more complex definitions (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997). Typically, rhetoric is composed of complete thoughts with the sentence as the basic unit; it is planned and structured discourse, not random comment. Its focus tends to be on solving problems. The substance of rhetoric is not facts but the interpretation, elaboration, and evaluation of data. Rhetoric does more than transmit information; it is addressed to others in order to provide practical solutions. Finally, rhetoric is poetic. It plays a ritualistic or aesthetic role, displaying dramatic or emotive qualities that may influence others. More recently, scholars have begun to study visual rhetoric and body rhetoric, noting the ways that visual units and the body function like verbal units (Palczewski, 2002). This is useful in the examination of
nonverbal contributors in gender/sex construction. Ultimately, we want to help you understand how public rhetoric about gender/sex influences the way each person expresses her or his gender/sex (Sloop, 2004). Throughout this description, note that we have been defining the practice of rhetoric; however, the term rhetoric also is used to refer to the study of rhetoric. Rhetor refers to one who uses rhetoric, and rhetorician tends to refer to one who studies rhetoric.

The most complete way to study gender in communication is to try to keep all three of these levels—individual, interpersonal, and societal or public—in mind. Doing so makes it easier to recognize that the gender/sex norms that influence individual and interpersonal communication also influence the range of rhetorical choices available to people giving public speeches. Similarly, the way politicians or popular culture stars speak may influence one’s expectations of how people in daily lives will interact. The way a person talks influences the ways the person and others are gendered/sexed. This text examines ways in which different communication contexts and levels create, maintain, and change gender/sex in people’s lives. This multilevel approach also helps one avoid the trap of essentializing gender/sex communication.

**CONTRADICTION**

Another tool that will help render a more complex and realistic view of gender/sex is the concept of contradiction. Contradiction refers to the tensions commonly present in one’s communication, identity, relations with others, and relations to the larger culture. It is part of what makes these dynamic and ever changing. Communication scholars and psychologists have long recognized that individuals, relationships, and the larger society are filled with apparent contradictions or inconsistencies in their values, behaviors, beliefs, identities, and so forth. This does not mean that people are necessarily aware of the contradictions, or that individuals would agree with what outsiders might label contradictory. It means that humans are amazingly complex, resilient beings and that social life is largely about coping with, balancing, or redefining apparent contradictions. Strategies for coping with contradiction are not necessarily about overt efforts to resist oppressive forces such as society’s gender/sex expectations. Such strategies are more commonly about “attempts to work within perceived or internalized structural constraints,” not attempts to resist them (Bloustien, 2003, p. 12). Australian communication scholar Gerry Bloustien (2003), in an ethnographic study with 10 young women, found they used play as a strategy to try out seemingly contradictory images of femininity and masculinity to find ones that worked for them.

The idea that we need to recognize contradictions as we study gender/sex in communication came to the forefront of our thinking through the writing of U.S. third-wave feminists (e.g., Dicker & Piepmeier, 2003). Third-wave feminism generally refers to feminists born in the 1960s and 1970s. The concept of contradiction has helped many younger people more comfortably place themselves in the feminist movement. The classic illustrations of people embracing contradiction are young women wearing baby-doll dresses and combat boots and young goth men wearing...
makeup, dyed hair, and black leather pants with chains; these contradictory symbols represent how they might see themselves as capable of being feminine or masculine and stylish warriors.

Contradiction emphasizes how people live with multiple (apparent) inconsistencies contained in their singular, coherent bodies. Because intersecting identities affect people simultaneously, it is understandable that these complex, multiple identities may at times be in tension with each other. Being masculine may at times conflict with being homosexual or bisexual, which may conflict with being of Japanese descent, and so on. Yet, one person’s identity can contain these contradictions.

We include contradiction as a part of our critical vocabulary because it resonates with many related concepts and goals in our study of gender/sex in communication. First, it encourages readers to remember that no group of people is homogeneous. Thus, it can help prevent generalizations such as “men do this” and “women do that.” Second, it reminds readers that life is about choices, even if these choices are somewhat limited by socialization influences and cultural taboos. Everyone faces contradictions in seeking to balance the many life tensions related to these choices. In the study of gender in communication, the concept of contradiction makes visible the diverse rhetorical choices people make when faced with similar dilemmas. The notion of contradiction reminds one of the range of choices available, as well as the pressures of social norms and the need to be tolerant of the variety of choices others make.

Third, the concept of contradiction and the related choices involved can help create spaces for a variety of ways of living and a diversity of identities. This is especially important for persons in oppressed and marginalized groups. When cultures value contradiction and complexity, persons no longer have to fully subscribe to the way of life of the dominant culture. They can carve out their own ways of living. For example, immigrant women and men do not have to fully assimilate a dominant culture’s notion of gender/sex; they can create identities based on the contradictions of the cultures they left and the ones they have joined.

Fourth, you will find the concept of contradiction present at every level of communication. Recognizing this can be personally and professionally liberating. It is present at the intrapersonal level, defining the self. For example, psychologists note that the seemingly contradictory desires for agency (self-achievement and independence) and communion (forming connections with others) exist in all people. These needs are not reserved only for masculine or feminine persons as social stereotypes suggest. Both are necessary for good mental health (Helgeson, 1994).

Contradiction is present at the interpersonal level, as communication scholars Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery (1996) make clear in their popular dialectic tensions theory. The theory suggests that relationships consist of tensions between seemingly opposite interpersonal needs, such as autonomy/connection and desires for openness/closedness in self-disclosure. It is through communication that people successfully or unsuccessfully negotiate these tensions, hopefully to their mutual satisfaction.

Contradiction is present at the group and cultural levels as well, which is one reason why generalized statements describing an entire group of people, such as a...
nation or even a family, are stereotypes at best. To help recognize this limitation, when we make statements about the values of a given culture in this textbook, we refer to predominant cultural values rather than assuming that such values are true for all. In fact, because cultures—like communication, relationships, and people—are always evolving, tensions and contradictions are necessarily present. Therefore, to study a culture completely, one must study all groups and all aspects of the contradictions at the same time (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). These should not be studied separately. One cannot fully understand the concept of femininity without studying the concept of masculinity, and one cannot study gender within a specific community, such as Mexican American immigrants to the United States, without taking into consideration the predominant White community in which they try to coexist.

Fifth, revealing contradictions can be an important step toward personal and group survival. It can reveal ways people can become trapped within seemingly inconsistent truths, and it can identify coping strategies. Contradictions can create double binds that may be harmful to mental health; they can also put persons in subordinate positions in interpersonal relations and in dominant cultures (Taylor & Perry, 2001).

Communication researchers Valerie Renegar and Stacey Sowards (2003) eloquently explain that an analysis of contradiction can create

a coherent, unifying, ironic feminist rhetorical theory that demonstrates the importance of language and rhetoric, eliminating pain and humiliation from our language, demanding solidarity among all sorts of humans, highlighting social hope and optimism, and providing a theory that tolerates, mediates, respects, and encourages differences. (p. 332)

By studying contradiction, we are not reverting to a binary way of thinking about gender/sex in communication but rather attempting to make other ways of thinking more visible.

Systems of Hierarchy

This is the last and broadest level of analysis necessary for our critical gender/sex lenses. The phrase systems of hierarchy refers to our earlier discussion that gender/sex is not simply located within individuals but exists within the larger predominant culture. Gender/sex, together with race, class, sexual orientation, and other cultural identities, lives in the ideology, norms, laws, worldview, traditions, popular culture, and social institutions that sustain a society. The institutionalized nature of these systems of hierarchy makes their influence more implicit and pervasive, as we discuss in Part II of this book.

Culture

Gender must be studied in its specific cultural contexts in order to best understand the unique gender identities created there. Culture is difficult to define because it is everywhere and includes so many things. Culture is composed of
conceptions of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religions, time, social roles, worldviews, land, and even the material possessions or artifacts acquired by a group of people. More simply, it is “learned patterns of behavior and attitudes shared by a group of people” (Martin & Nakayama, 2004, p. 3). Together, the primary function of culture is to create shared meanings, shared views of the world, and a group identity. Through these characteristics, cultures also serve to help reduce uncertainty and chaos largely by socializing their members to behave in prescribed ways. Cultures can exist on many levels, in families, neighborhoods, towns and cities, ethnic and racial groups, religious groups, regions of a country, and nations.

All this is not to suggest that there is one uniform cultural view for any group of people. Rather, within a given larger culture there are predominant views and predominant social groups, as well as contested, or minority, views and groups. Intercultural communication researchers Judith Martin and Thomas Nakayama argue that cultures are by nature “contested zones” (2004, p. 58). That is, there are multiple power inequalities within a given culture, including gender/sex.

**Hegemony**

The term *hegemony* designates the systems of hierarchy maintained by the predominant social group’s ideology that comes to dominate other social groups (Gramsci, Rosenthal, & Rosengarten, 1993). Philosopher Rosemary Hennessy (1995) explains that hegemony is not a form of power that controls through overt violence; rather, it controls subtly by determining what makes sense: “Hegemony is the process whereby the interests of a ruling group come to dominate by establishing the common sense, that is, those values, beliefs, and knowledges that go without saying” (pp. 145–146). People willingly belong to cultures for the protection and order those cultures provide, even though predominant cultural ideology may control them in some ways. By following society’s norms of behavior, members uphold the culture’s ideology.

*Cultural ideology* refers to the ideas, values, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings that are known to members of a society and that guide their behaviors. For example, capitalism is not only an economic system but also a dominant ideology in Western culture. This ideology undergirds the values and behaviors that support competition, individualism, consumerism, status, money, and power. This does not mean that every person in Western culture embraces such ideology, but it does explain the predominant system and culture in which all members must try to survive. Stuart Hall, a British scholar in cultural studies, says that dominant cultural ideology influences how we come to perceive reality (1989).

**Power**

The word *power* can simply mean “the ability to get things done” (Kramarae & Treichler, 1992, p. 351). It is not an innately evil concept. However, feminist theorists make an important distinction between “power to” and “power over”
(Freeman & Bourque, 2001, pp. 10–11). Power to is the ability to get things done that do not infringe on others’ rights and may actually lead to the emancipation of others. Power over refers to coercive misuses of power. If one is in a position of power over others, then one can dominate and coerce others and in the process subordinate or oppress them. If one lacks power over, one is more likely to be in a subordinate position. The interesting point is that to respond to any instance of power over, or to get out of a situation in which one is suppressed by those who have power over, one needs power to.

Power is a social phenomenon. People have power in relationship to others. Social power is embedded in the communicative negotiations of gender/sex, race, class, sexual orientation, and other identities. For each of these social groups, multiple differences are socially created. The important point repeated throughout this text is that differences are rarely constructed equally. Rather, the groups that have more say about the construction are privileged over others. Thus, in the study of gender/sex in communication, one must include the concept of power and related concepts such as domination, subordination, oppression and privilege, as well as responses to power such as accommodation, individual empowerment, resistance, and group emancipation. Through communication, people, groups, and social structures can dominate and empower others and themselves.

Studying power does not mean blaming individuals. Power can exist at the interpersonal level in one’s ability to control or dominate others in the negotiation of personal or professional relationships (Weber, 1947). More important, power is systemic. You cannot see power. It is usually implicit or sanctioned by cultural norms and ideology. It exists at multiple levels in society at one time. Thus, it is difficult to study, and yet the implications of power are omnipresent. It can exist at the larger institutional level, such as in the norms of competition for giant corporations, in power differences ascribed according to social categories that oppress some groups to benefit other groups, and in the general hegemonic relations the dominant culture has with individuals (Foucault, 1980).

People who hold social power possess social privilege. Privileges are unearned freedoms or opportunities. Often, privileges are unconscious and unmarked. They are socialized through cultural hegemony, which makes them easy to deny and more resistant to change. Most people enjoy some degree or type of privilege. U.S. citizens enjoy certain freedoms that they may take for granted but that those in countries with dictatorships or military regimes cannot. At a more personal level, when violence prevention educator Jackson Katz asks men in his workshops what they do to prepare to walk alone on campus at night, most of them respond with an unknowing stare. When he asks women this question, they readily offer several strategies they use to keep safe, such as phoning roommates ahead to tell them they are leaving, carrying their keys pointed out between their fingers as a weapon against would-be attackers, or looking in their cars before they open the doors (see Katz, 2003). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons often try to pass as straight to avoid possible verbal or physical violence. Heterosexuals usually do not have to consider such acts. Where there is privilege, there is unspoken power and the ability to misuse that power to oppress others.
Violence. We cannot adequately study gender communication without addressing abuses of power manifested in psychological or physical violence. Communication studies scholar Robert Hopper (2003) writes: “There is one undeniable sex difference in social behavior: men sexually harass, assault, and rape women, whereas women rarely do comparable acts” (p. 55). Hopper proceeds to note that cultural norms regarding flirting, men as sexual aggressors, and masculinity “bear a troubling relationship” to violence (p. 55).

We note this troubling relationship to highlight how many other gendered social practices contribute to a culture that normalizes the violence committed by many men against many women, feminine people, and persons perceived as homosexual. These practices include the seemingly innocent standard that girls and women should be more polite, ladylike, and willing to smile, and that they should take sexist remarks, street calls, and whistles as innocent jokes or flattery whether they like it or not (Kramarae, 1992). Those who speak up risk criticism or physical retaliation. Such gendered social practices also include the expectation that all men should be aggressive, sexually active, and unemotional or risk abuse of some kind.

Sociologist Charlene Muehlenhard and associates point out that social pressures can be coercive and that coercion is violence. People who are coerced feel they have no choice but to comply, such as when married persons and young teens have sexual relations even though they do not want to (Muehlenhard, Goggins, Jones, & Satterfield, 1991). The coercion can be verbal or nonverbal, direct or indirect. Dutch linguist Teun van Dijk (1995) notes that talk is not the alternative to physical force; it, too, can be violent insofar as “discourse may enact, cause, promote, defend, instigate, and legitimate violence” (p. 307).

A tool that helps conceptualize the relationships between coercive gendered norms and violence is what feminist communication scholars Cheris Kramarae (1992) and Elizabeth Arveda Kissling (1991) call a violence continuum. They suggest viewing all forms of such gendered/sexed practices and the degree of violence within each of them on a continuum. By locating seemingly innocent gendered norms (such as that men should be virile and that women should play hard to get) on a common line with more overt forms of violence (such as rape and physical abuse), the observer is better able to see that such social practices create a culture in which gendered/sexed violence becomes normalized. The violence continuum reveals that violence can be overt or covert; intentional or unintentional; and verbal, emotional, or physical. The connections between all forms of violence expose that the responsibility for violence lies not just in the individual violator but in all who maintain the cultural ideology and structure.

Putting It All Together

Hopefully, we have demonstrated why we must go beyond a differences approach to the study of gender/sex in this text. As anthropologist Nancy Henley and communication scholar Cheris Kramarae (1991) write, “Most importantly, cultural difference does not exist within a political vacuum; rather, the strength of difference, the types of difference, the values applied to different forms, the
dominance of certain forms—all are shaped by the context ” (p. 40). When two people communicate, there are never just two parties present in the interaction, but multiple social groups are represented, such as race, class, and gender, each with varying degrees of privilege and oppression. We seek to study gender/sex in communication in a more dynamic way that allows for multidimensional, contradictory, and simultaneous influences. We seek to recognize the inherent, potentially political nature of gender/sex in communication.

The inclusion of power issues in the study of gender is not a radical new idea. Countless researchers in gender in communication have included similar discussions of power in scholarly books and articles (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992), but communication textbooks, like popular relationship books, often downplay this issue. Why? Perhaps it is an effort not to offend some readers or to avoid the discomfort people feel when inequalities are discussed and privileges are exposed.

To us, the risk is necessary. Learning comes from taking risks and allowing oneself to receive and consider information that may be inconsistent with one’s values or beliefs (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994). If you reflect on times in your life when you learned the most, you will know what we mean. Leaving home for the first time, going away to college, getting a job, having a child, going to another country, entering a committed relationship or leaving one all involve risk, but the potential rewards of self-understanding and analytical skills are well worth it. Power is central to explaining social realities that a focus on gender differences alone cannot, and it helps to construct a more realistic, complex picture of gender/sex dynamics that has relevance across cultures.

As we examine power and privilege issues and challenge common assumptions about gender/sex throughout the book, we offer one additional tool useful in constructing a critical gendered/sexed lens, reflexivity. It is a research analysis method used by qualitative and feminist researchers. Ethnographer Bud Goodall (2000) provides an excellent definition: “To be reflective means to turn back on our self the lens through which we are interpreting the world” (p. 137). Reflexivity encourages one to pay attention to, value, and critically analyze subjective (positive or negative) reactions to a topic of study to help reveal further personal and academic insights and to produce more ethical, rigorous conclusions. Reflexivity encourages open examination of your relationship to what you are studying. Such efforts can be informative and can promote self-growth.

In many ways, this textbook is a “how to” book. It explains how to study gender/sex more than it explains what already has been discovered in gender/sex research (although we’ll do a good bit of that as well). Given that the discipline’s understandings and people’s performances of gender/sex continually evolve, it is more important to know how to read, hear, understand, and critique gender in communication than it is to know what has already been discovered. Our goal is not to tell you the way things are, for the state of knowledge changes. Instead, our goal is to teach you how to see why things are the way they are. That way, you can consciously choose to embrace that which is liberatory and work against that which denies the full measure of your wonderfully unique, distinct, and idiosyncratic humanity.