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Gendering Desire

Nowhere in our intimate lives is there greater expression of gender difference than in our sexual relationships. “She” may make love “just like a woman,” as Bob Dylan famously sang, but “he” would make love just like a man. Though we often think that sexual orientation is the great dividing line in our sexual expression—if one is gay or straight one knows all one needs to know about their sexualities—the evidence points decidedly the other way, toward an understanding that gender, not sexual orientation, is the dividing line along which sexual expression, desire, and experience is organized. Gay men and straight men think and act sexually in similar ways, as do lesbians and straight women. In that sense, sexually speaking, gay men and lesbians are gender conformists.

There are, of course, some signs of change. Women are reconstructing the traditional view of female sexuality as passive and receptive; the fertile combination of feminism, technological and medical breakthroughs, and general cultural transition have ushered in an age of more casual female sexual expression, of women increasingly claiming their own sexual agency, their own entitlement to pleasure, an era in which Victoria’s “Secret” is now shopping mall fare, and in which *Sex in the City* describes more than the lifestyles of four very silly and seductive young women. In that sense, sexuality has become increasingly “masculinized.” The “masculinization of sex”—including the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, the increased attention to orgasm, the multiplication of sexual partners, the universal interest in sexual experimentation, and the separation of sexual behavior from love—is partly a result of the technological transformation of sexuality (from birth control to the Internet) and partly a result of the sexual revolution’s promise of greater sexual freedom with fewer emotional and physical consequences.

Much of that sexual revolution was a rejection of the Victorian double standard. According to writers of that era, women and men were different species. As the celebrated French historian Jules Michelet put it in 1881:

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[Woman] does nothing as we [men] do. She thinks, speaks, and acts differently. Her tastes are different from our tastes. Her blood even does not flow in her veins as ours does, at times it rushes through them like a foaming mountain torrent . . . She does not eat like us—neither as much nor of the same dishes. Why? Chiefly, because she does not digest as we do. Her digestion is every moment troubled with one thing: She yearns with her very bowels. The deep cup of love (which is called the pelvis) is a sea of varying emotions, hindering the regularity of the nutritive function. (cited in Gardetto, 1988, p. 18)

Sex was invariably seen as bad for women—unhealthy and immoral—while it was tolerated or even encouraged for men. “The majority of women (happily for them) are not much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind,” wrote one physician (obviously male) in the 1890s (cited in Ehrenreich & English, 1974).

Even when Alfred Kinsey undertook his pioneering studies of sexual behavior in the decade following the Second World War, this double standard was still firmly in place. As he wrote in 1953:

[W]e have not understood how nearly alike females and males may be in their sexual responses, and the extent to which they may differ. We have perpetuated the age-old traditions concerning the slower responsiveness of the female, the greater extent of the erogenous areas on the body of the female, the earlier sexual development of the female, the idea that there are basic differences in the nature of orgasm among females and males, the greater emotional content of the female’s sexual response, and still other ideas which are not based on scientifically accumulated data—and all of which now appear to be incorrect. It now appears that the very techniques which have been suggested in marriage manuals, both ancient and modern, have given rise to some of the differences that we have thought inherent in females and males. (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, p. 376)

Kinsey believed that males and females have basically the same physical responses, though men are more influenced by psychological factors. Note in the passage above how Kinsey suggests that the advice of experts actually *creates* much of the difference between women and men. One study of gynecology textbooks published between 1943 and 1972 bears this out. The authors found that many textbooks asserted that women could not experience orgasm during intercourse. One textbook writer observed, “sexual pleasure is entirely secondary or even absent” in women; another described women’s “almost universal frigidity.” Given such assumptions, it’s not surprising that women were counseled to fake orgasm; after all, they weren’t capable of real ones. “It is good advice to recommend to the women the advantage of innocent simulation of sex responsiveness; as a matter of fact many women in their desire to please their husbands learned the advantage

of such innocent deception,” was the way one text counseled gynecologists to raise the issue with their female patients (cited in Bart, 1974, pp. 6–7).

The double standard persists today—perhaps less in what we actually do and more in the way we think about sex. Men still stand to gain status and women to lose it from sexual experience: he’s a stud who scores; she’s a slut who “gives it up.” Boys are taught to try to get sex; girls are taught strategies to foil the boys’ attempts. “The whole game was to get a girl to give out,” one man told sociologist Lillian Rubin. “You expected her to resist; she had to if she wasn’t going to ruin her reputation. But you kept pushing. Part of it was the thrill of touching and being touched, but I’ve got to admit, part of it was the conquest, too, and what you’d tell the guys at school the next day.” “I felt as if I should want to get it as often as possible,” recalled another. “I guess that’s because if you’re a guy, you’re supposed to want it” (1991, pp. 28, 42). The sexual double standard is more than a case of separate but equal sexual scripting, more than a case of complementary “his” and “her” sexualities, like a matching set of bathroom towels.

The sexual double standard is itself a product of gender inequality, of sexism—the unequal distribution of power in our society based on gender. Gender inequality is reinforced by the ways we have come to assume that men are more sexual than women, that men will always try to escalate sexual encounters to prove their manhood, and that women—or, rather, “ladies”—either do not have strong sexual feelings, or that those who do must be constantly controlled lest they fall into disrepute. With such a view, sex becomes a contest, not a means of connection; when sexual pleasure happens, it’s often seen as his victory over her resistance. Sexuality becomes, in the words of feminist lawyer Catharine MacKinnon, “the linchpin of gender inequality” (1996, p. 185).

Women are raised to believe that to be sexually active or promiscuous is to transgress the rules of femininity. These rules are enforced not just by men, of course, but also by other women, and institutionalized by church, state, and school. The pursuit of sex transforms good girls into bad girls, so most women accept the cultural standard of sexual minimalism—few partners, fewer positions, less pleasure, less sex without emotional commitment. Such an ideology keeps a woman waiting for her Prince Charming to liberate her, to arouse her with his tender kisses, and release the passion smoldering beneath her cooler surface.

Examples of these different scripts abound—from what we think about, what we want, and what we actually do. For example, consider what “counts” as sex. When they say the word “sex,” women and men often mean different things. In one study, monogamous heterosexual couples in their mid-40s were asked, “How many times did you make love last week?” Consistently, the researchers found, the men reported slightly higher numbers than the women. What could this indicate—better memories? masculine braggadocio? clandestine affairs? solitary pleasures? When the researchers asked more questions, they found the difference was the result of women and men counting different experiences as “making love.” The women would count one sexual encounter once, while the men tallied up the

number of their orgasms. Thus, while a woman might say, "Hmm, we made love three times last week," her husband might say, "Hmm, let me see, we did it three times, but one of those times we did it twice [meaning that he had two orgasms], so I guess the answer is four."

The differences in counting criteria reveal deeper differences in the understanding of sexual expression. Women's understanding that sex equals the entire encounter gives them a somewhat broader range of sexual activities that count as sex. Men's focus on orgasm as the defining feature of sex parallels their tendency to exclude all acts except intercourse from "having sex." Oral or manual stimulation are seen as "foreplay" for men, as "sex" for women. Men cannot tally the encounter on their mental scorecard unless intercourse also occurs. This often results in complex rules about what constitutes a "technical virgin." (The recent public seminar on what counts as "sexual relations" in the impeachment trial of President Clinton bears this out. Since he and Monica Lewinsky did not have sexual intercourse, and instead did what girls in my high school used to call "everything but," Clinton argued that he did not lie when he denied having sex with Lewinsky. In his mind, as one of my pals in the locker room explained it to me, "it only counts if you put it in." And some recent medical evidence bears this out; a recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that only intercourse "counted" as sex for nearly two-fifths of those surveyed. Fifty-nine percent of respondents believed that oral-genital contact did not constitute "having sex") (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999, p. 281).

Intercourse and orgasm are more important forms of sexual expression for men than they are for women. This leads to a greater emphasis on the genitals as the single most important erogenous zone for men. If men's sexuality is phallocentric—revolving around the glorification and gratification of the penis—then it is not surprising that men often develop elaborate relationships with their genitals. Some men name their penis—"Willie," "John Thomas," or "Peter"—or give them cute nicknames taken from mass-produced goods like "Whopper" and "Big Mac." Men may come to believe that their penises have little personalities, (or, perhaps, what feel like big personalities), threatening to refuse to behave the way they are supposed to behave. If men do not personify the penis, they objectify it; if it is not a little person, then it is supposed to act like a machine, an instrument, a "tool." A man projects "the coldness and hardness of metal" onto his flesh, writes one French philosopher (Reynaud, 1983, p. 41).

Few women name their genitals; fewer still think of their genitals as machines. Can you imagine if they called their clitorises "Shirley" or their labia "Sally Ann"? In fact, women rarely refer to their genitals by their proper names at all, generally describing vulva, labia, and clitoris with the generic "vagina" or even the more euphemistic "down there" or "private parts." And it would be rare indeed to see a woman having a conversation with her labia (see Tavris, 1992 and Lerner, 1998).

So when they think about sex, men and women are often thinking about different things. Actually, thinking about sex at all seems to be a gendered activity. Men tend to think about sex more often than women. Over half of the men surveyed (54 percent) in the most recent large-scale sex survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago reported that they think about sex very frequently, compared with 19 percent of the women. Two-thirds of the women report that they think about sex less frequently, compared with 43 percent of the men. And 14 percent of the women say they rarely or never think about sex, compared with only 4 percent of the men (Laumann et al., 1994).

Forty years earlier, Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues had found that 89 percent of men who masturbated fantasized, while only 64 percent of women did. And what they “use” for their fantasies differs. Today, nearly one-fourth (23 percent of men and 11 percent of women) use X-rated movies or videos; 16 percent of men and 4 percent of women use sexually explicit books or magazines (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 135). And what they fantasize about differs dramatically. A research assistant and I have collected over 1,000 sexual fantasies from students over the past decade. In those fantasies, definite gender patterns emerged. Men tend to fantasize about strangers, often more than one at a time, doing a variety of well-scripted sexual acts; women tend to fantasize about setting the right mood for lovemaking with their boyfriend or husband, but rarely visualize specific behaviors (see chapter 3, of this volume).

Men’s fantasies are idealized renditions of masculine sexual scripts: genitally focused, orgasm centered, and explicit in the spatial and temporal sequencing of sexual behaviors. We know exactly who does what to whom in what precise order. Physical characteristics of the other participants are invariably highly detailed; these are most often strangers (or famous models or actresses) chosen for their physical attributes. Rarely do they include the physical setting for the encounter. Women’s fantasies, on the other hand, are replete with descriptions that set the scene—geographic and temporal settings, with elaborate placement of props like candles, rugs, and wine glasses. They often involve present or past partners. Explicitly sexual description is minimal and usually involves vague references to lovemaking.

Thus we might say that women’s *sexual* imaginations are impoverished at the expense of highly developed *sensual* imaginations; by contrast, men’s sensual imaginations are impoverished by their highly developed sexual imaginations. (These differences hold for both heterosexual and homosexual women and men, a further indication that the basic component in our sexual scripts is gender, not sexual orientation.) While there has been some evidence of shifts in women’s fantasies toward more sexually explicit scenes, and increasing comfort with explicit language, these fantasies do reveal both what we think and what we think we are supposed to think about when we think about sex (see Hariton & Singer, 1974;

Goleman, 1983; May, 1980; Chick & Gold, 1987–88; Mednick, 1977; Follingstad & Kimbrell, 1986; Knafo & Jaffe, 1984).

Where do these dramatically different mental landscapes come from? One place, of course, is sexual representation. Pornography occupies a special place in the development of men's sexuality. Nearly all men confess to having some exposure to pornography, at least as adolescents; indeed, for many men, the first naked women they see are in pornographic magazines. And pornography has been the site of significant political protest—from an erotophobic right wing that considers pornography to be as degrading to human dignity as birth control information, homosexuality, and abortion, to radical feminist campaigns that see pornography as a vicious expression of misogyny, on par with rape, spouse abuse, and genital mutilation (see chapters 4–6 in this volume).

While the right wing's efforts rehearsed America's discomfort with all things sexual, the radical feminist critique of pornography transformed the political debate, arguing that when men looked at pornographic images of naked women, they were actually participating in a culture-wide hatred and contempt for women. Pornographic images are about the subordination of women; pornography "makes sexism sexy," in the words of one activist. Here is one pornographic director and actor, commenting on his "craft":

My whole reason for being in the [pornography] Industry is to satisfy the desire of the men in the world who basically don't much care for women and want to see the men in my Industry getting even with the women they couldn't have when they were growing up . . . So when we come on a woman's face or somewhat brutalize her sexually, we're getting even for their lost dreams. I believe this. I've heard audiences cheer me when I do something foul on screen. When I've strangled a person or sodomized a person or brutalized a person, the audience is cheering my action, and then when I've fulfilled my warped desire, the audience applauds. (Stoller, 1991, p. 31)

The claims of antipornography feminists—that pornography causes rape, or that it numbs us to the real effect of real violence in women's lives—have been difficult to demonstrate empirically. Few studies have shown such an empirical relationship, though several have documented some modest changes in men's attitudes immediately after exposure to violent pornography. Yet whether or not there is *any* empirical evidence that the pornography alone causes rape or violence, there remains the shocking difference between us: On any given day in the United States, there are men masturbating to images of women enduring sexual torture, genital mutilation, rape, and violence. Surely, this points to a dramatic difference between women's and men's sexualities—one can hardly imagine many women masturbating to reenactments of Lorena Bobbitt's ministrations to her husband. Violence is rarely sexualized for women; that such images can be a routine and casual turn on for many men should at least give us pause.

Pornography also exaggerates the masculinization of sex. In typical porn video scenes, both women and men want sex—even when women don't want it, when they are forced or raped, it turns out that they wanted it after all. Both women and men are always looking for opportunities to have sex, both are immediately aroused and ready for penetration, and both have orgasms within fifteen seconds of penetration. Which gender's sexuality does that sound like? As a result, as antipornography activist John Stoltenberg writes, pornography "tells lies about women," but it "tells the truth about men" (1990, p. 121).

Given men's and women's different sexual mentalities, it's not surprising that we develop different sexualities, as evidenced in our attitudes and behaviors. "For sex to really work for me, I need to feel an emotional *something*," one woman told Lillian Rubin. "Without that, it's just another athletic activity, only not as satisfying, because when I swim or run, I feel good afterward" (p. 102). Women's first sexual experiences are more likely to occur in the context of a committed relationship (Tavris & Wade, 1984, p. 111). Since women tend to connect sex and emotion, it makes sense that they would be less interested in one-night stands, affairs and nonmonogamy. In one survey, women were about 20 percent more likely to agree that one-night stands are degrading (47 percent of the men agreed; 68 percent of the women agreed). Men are more likely to be unfaithful to their spouse, though that gender gap has closed considerably in the past two decades. And, of course, the separation of sex and emotion means that men are more likely to have had more sexual partners than women, although this gender gap has also been narrowing over the past few decades (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 279; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998, pp. 60-61).¹

Men's wider sexual repertoire usually includes desiring oral sex, about which women report being far less enthusiastic. As one woman explained:

I like going down on him. It makes him feel good, truly good. I don't find it unpleasant. I don't say I wish I could do it all the time. I don't equate it with a sale at Bloomingdale's. That I could do all the time. But it's not like going to the dentist either. It's between two extremes. Closer to Bloomingdale's than to the dentist. (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 234)

But perhaps this has less to do with the intrinsic meaning of the act, and more to do with the gender of the actor. For example, when men describe their experiences with oral sex, it is nearly always from the position of power. Whether fellatio—"I feel so powerful when I see her kneeling in front of me"—or cunnilingus—"being able to get her off with my tongue makes me feel so powerful"—men experience the giving and receiving of oral sex as an expression of their power. By contrast, women perceive both giving and receiving oral sex from the position of powerlessness—not necessarily because they are forced to do so, but because "it makes him happy" for them to either do it, or let him do it. So oral sex, like intercourse, allows him to feel "like a man," regardless of who does what to whom.

Where does the sexual gender gap come from? Though we are constantly bombarded with sexual images in the media and receive lessons about sexual morality from our parents, our teachers, and our religious institutions, most of our sexual learning comes during adolescence, and most of our adolescent sexual socialization is accomplished by our peers. We teach ourselves, and each other, about what feels good and why, and then we practice performing those activities until they do feel the way we're told we're supposed to feel.

Remember, for example, those junior high school "wrestling matches"—two adolescents trying to negotiate, usually without words, the extent of their sexual contact. Both the boy and the girl have goals, though they may be very different. "His" object, of course, is to score—and toward that end he has a variety of maneuvers, arguments, and other strategies his friends have taught him. "Her" object may be pleasure, but it is also to preserve and protect her reputation as a "good girl," which requires that she be seen as alluring but not "easy." "Young men come to sex with quite different expectations and desires than do young women," the NORC sex survey declared. "Young women often go along with intercourse the first time, finding little physical pleasure in it, and a substantial number report being forced to have intercourse" (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 347).

By the time we get to be adults, this socialized distance between women and men can ossify into the different experiences we are said to have. Each gender is seeking to express different feelings, for different reasons, with different repertoires, and so it may appear that we are from different planets. In the British film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, a lesbian character suggests that heterosexuals are to be pitied. "The women spend all their time trying to come, and they're unsuccessful, and the men spend all their time trying not to come, and they're unsuccessful also."

She has a point. Since many men believe that adequate sexual functioning is being able to delay ejaculation, some develop strategies to prevent what they consider to be premature ejaculation—strategies that exaggerate emotional distancing, phallogentrism, the focus on orgasm, and objectification. Here's how Woody Allen once put it in a stand-up comedy routine from the mid-1960s. After describing himself as a "stud," Allen says:

When making love, in an effort to [pause] to prolong [pause] the moment of ecstasy, I think of baseball players. All right, now you know. So the two of us are making love violently, and she's digging it, so I figure I'd better start thinking of baseball players pretty quickly. So I figure it's one out, and the Giants are up. Mays lines a single to right. He takes second on a wild pitch. Now she's digging her nails into my neck. I decide to pinch-hit for McCovey. [pause for laughter] Alou pops out. Haller singles, Mays takes third. Now I've got a first and third situation. Two outs and the Giants are behind one run. I don't know whether to squeeze or to steal. [pause for laughter] She's been in the shower for ten minutes already. [pause] I can't tell you anymore, this is too personal. [pause] The Giants won.

Readers may be struck by several things—the imputation of violence, how her pleasure leads to his decision to think of baseball players, the requirement of victory in the game, and the sexual innuendo contained in the sports language. The text also supplies a startling revelation of male sexual distancing. Here's a device that is so successful at delaying ejaculation (or any sexual connection) that the narrator is rendered utterly unaware of his partner's experience. "She's been in the shower for ten minutes already," Allen remarks, as if he's just noticed. Other men describe elaborate mental scripting of sports scenes, reciting multiplication tables, or, in the case of one of my students, a chemistry major, reciting, in order, the periodic table of the elements. No wonder women often wonder what men are thinking about during sex!

When it goes "right," we clearly observe the gendered qualities of sex. Another illustration of the genderedness of sex comes from research on what happens when things go wrong. For example, when men seek therapeutic evaluation for sexual problems, they rarely describe not experiencing enough pleasure. One man who experienced premature ejaculation reported that he felt like he "isn't a real man" because he "can't satisfy a woman." Another, with erectile problems, told a therapist that "a real man never has to ask his wife for anything sexually" and he "should be able to please her whenever he wants." Each of these men thus expressed a sexual problem in gender terms; each fears that his sexual problem damages his masculinity, makes him less of a real man. For these men, sexuality is less about mutual pleasuring and more about hydraulic functioning. Is it any wonder that men use the language of the workplace (in addition to using metaphors from sports and war) to describe sexual experiences. We use the "tool" to "get the job done," which is, of course, to "achieve" orgasm, or else we experience "performance anxiety." Men with sexual problems are rarely gender non-conformists, unable or unwilling to follow the rules of masculine sexual adequacy. If anything, they are overconformists to norms that define sexual adequacy by the ability to function like a well-oiled machine (see chapter 8 in this volume).

Closing the Sexual Gender Gap

Despite the persistence of gender differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors, the sexual gender gap has been closing in recent years, as women's and men's sexual experiences come to more closely resemble one another's. Or, rather, women's experiences have come to resemble men's. As I argued earlier, our experience of love has been feminized and our sexuality has been increasingly "masculinized." While men's sexual behavior has hardly changed, women's sexuality has changed dramatically, moving increasingly closer to the behavior of men. (This probably both thrills and terrifies men.)

Part of this transformation has been the result of the technological breakthroughs and ideological shifts that have come to be known as the sexual revolution.

Since the 1960s, the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake has been increasingly available to women, as adequate and relatively safe birth control and legal abortion have made it possible to separate fully sexual activity from reproduction. (Men, of course, always were able to pursue sexual pleasure for its own sake; thus, in this sense, women's sexuality has come to more closely resemble men's.) "I guess sex was originally to produce another body; then I guess it was for love; nowadays it's just for feeling good," was the way one 15-year-old boy summed up the shift (Rubin, 1991, p. 13). In addition, widespread sex education has made people more sexually aware—but not necessarily more sexually active. In one recent literature review of 53 studies that examined the effects of sex education and HIV education on sexual activity, 27 found no changes in rates of sexual activity, and 22 observed marked decreases, delayed onset of activity, and reduced number of sexual partners. Only three studies found any increase in sexual activity associated with sex education. It would appear that sex education enables people to make *better* sexual decisions, and encourages more responsibility, not less (Gruneit et al., 1997).

Ideologically, feminism made the pursuit of sexual pleasure, the expression of women's sexual autonomy, a political goal. No longer would women believe that they were sexually disinterested, passive and virtuous asexual angels. Women were as entitled to pleasure as men were. And, practically, they knew how to get it, once feminists exposed what one feminist called "the myth of the vaginal orgasm." Feminism was thus, in part, a political resistance to what we might call the "socialized asexuality" of feminine sexuality. "Part of my attraction to feminism involved the right to be a sexual person," recalls one woman. Another envisioned a feminism that "validates the right for a woman to say yes instead of no" (Hollibaugh, 1996). In the past three decades, then, it's been women's sexuality that has been transformed, as women have sought to express their own sexual agency. Consider, for example, the transformation of the idea of sexual experience in the first place. While it used to be that men were expected to have some sexual experience prior to marriage, many women and men placed a premium on women's virginity. Not anymore. As Lillian Rubin writes, "in the brief span of one generation—from the 1940s to the 1960s—we went from mothers who believed their virginity was their most prized possession to daughters for whom it was a burden." Virginity was no longer "a treasure to be safeguarded"; now, it was "a problem to be solved" (pp. 5, 46).

Rates and motivations for masturbation have also begun to converge. What, after all, is masturbation but self-pleasuring—surely, an expression of sexual agency. The most recent large-scale national sex survey found that men's and women's motivations for masturbation were roughly similar (Laumann, 1994, p. 86; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998, p. 39). As are sexual attitudes. In the NORC sex survey, 36 percent of men and 53 percent of women born between 1933 and 1942 believed that premarital sex was almost always wrong. These numbers declined for both groups, but declined far more sharply for women, so that for those born between 1963 and 1974, only 16 percent of men and 22 percent of

women believed that premarital sex was almost always wrong (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 507).

Sexual behaviors, too, have grown increasingly similar. Among teenage boys, sexual experience has remained virtually the same since the mid-1940s, with about 70 percent of all high school aged boys having had sexual intercourse (the rates were about 50 percent for those who went to high school in the late 1920s). But the rates for high school girls have changed dramatically, up from 5 percent in the 1920s to 20 percent in the late 1940s, to 55 percent in 1982, and 60 percent in 1991. And the age of first intercourse has steadily declined for both boys and girls. Similarly, although the rates of teenage virgins have declined for both girls and boys, they have declined more rapidly for girls. The number of teenagers who have had more than five different sexual partners by their eighteenth birthday has increased for both sexes, the rate of increase is also greater for girls as well (Laumann et al., 1994; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998, p. 165).

For adults, rates of premarital sex and the number of sex partners seem to be moving closer. In another survey, 99 percent of male college graduates and 90 percent of female college graduates said that they had had sex before marriage. Researchers in one survey of sexual behavior from the 1970s, found far greater sexual activity and greater variety among married women in the 1970s than Kinsey had found in the late 1940s. Ninety percent of all married women claimed to be happy with their sex lives; three-quarters were content with its frequency, while 25 percent wanted more. A study in the 1980s echoed this trend. Women and men displayed similar sexual desires—both wanted frequent sex, were happiest when initiating and refusing sex in equal amounts, and became discontent when sex was infrequent (see Laumann et al., 1994; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998; Janus, 1993; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Segal, 1997).

What turns us on sexually is also similar. In the 1970s, psychologist Julia Heiman developed a way to measure women's sexual arousal. Samples of college women listened to two sorts of tapes—romantic and explicitly sexual—while wearing a tamponlike device that measured blood flow to the vagina. Like men, women were far more sexually aroused by explicit sex talk than they were by romance (Kolata, 1998, p. 3). And interest in sexual variety also appears to be converging. Experiences of oral sex have increased dramatically for both women and for men. And, if one 20-year-old college woman is to be believed, the meanings attached to oral sex seem to be shifting as well. "I was about 16 and I had this friend—not a boyfriend, a boy *friend*—and I didn't know what to give him for his birthday, so I gave him a blow job. I wanted to know what it was like; it was just for kicks," is what she told an interviewer, "without a trace of embarrassment or self-consciousness" (Rubin, 1991, p. 14).

It would appear that women are having more sex and enjoying it more than ever in our history. And so women are far less likely, now, to fake orgasm. When Lillian Rubin interviewed white working-class women in the mid-1970s for her study *Worlds of Pain*, she found that over 70 percent of the women said they faked

orgasm at least some of the time. Now, she finds that the same percentage says that they never fake it (Rubin, 1991, p. 120).

The evidence of gender conversion does not mean that there are no differences between women and men in their sexual expression. It still means different things to be sexual, but the rules are not enforced with the ferocity and consistency that they were in the past. "It's different from what it used to be when women were supposed to hold out until they got married. There's pressure now on both men and women to lose their virginity," is how one 29-year-old man put it. "But for a man it's a sign of manhood, and for a woman there's still some loss of value" (Rubin, 1991, p. 58). Moreover, though both men and women feel entitled to pleasure, and both have their first sexual experience because they wanted to, men still seem to believe that that entitlement also covers acting on it—even when the woman doesn't want to. "I paid for a wonderful evening," commented one college man, "and I was entitled to sex for my effort." As a result of attitudes like these, cases of date and acquaintance rape continue to skyrocket on our campuses (Koss et al., 1988).

About 15 percent of college women report having been sexually assaulted; more than half of these assaults were by a person whom the woman was dating. Some studies have estimated the rates to be significantly higher, nearly double (27%) that of the study undertaken by Mary Koss and her colleagues (1988). And, while some pundits have expressed outrage that feminists have transformed college-aged women into "victims," it is more accurate to express outrage that predatory males have turned college women into victims of sexual assault. Any number of rapes is unacceptable. But that significant numbers of college women are forced to change their behaviors because of the behaviors of these men—where they study, how late they stay in the library, which parties they go to, whom they date—is the outrage.

Among adults, women and men report quite different rates of forced sex. While 96.1 percent of men and 77.2 percent of women say they have never been forced to have sex against their will, those who have been forced display dramatic differences. Just slightly more than 1 percent of men (1.3%), but over one-fifth of all women (21.6%) were forced to have sex by the opposite sex; only about 2 percent of men (1.9%) and just .3% of women were forced by someone of the same sex. Men continue to be the principal sexual predators. Several studies estimate the likelihood that a woman will be the victim of a completed rape to be about one in five. The figure for an attempted rape is nearly double that (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 336; Koss et al., 1994).

Women's increase in sexual agency, revolutionary as it is, has not been accompanied by a decrease in male sexual entitlement, nor by a sharp increase in men's capacity for intimacy and emotional connectedness. Thus, just as some feminist women have celebrated women's claim to sexual autonomy, others—therapists and activists—have deplored men's adherence to a "non-relational" model of sexual behavior. As with friendship and with love, it's men who have the problem, and psychologists like Ronald Levant seek to replace "irresponsible,

detached, compulsive, and alienated sexuality with a type of sexuality that is ethically responsible, compassionate for the well-being of participants, and sexually empowering of men" (1997, p. 270).

The notion of nonrelational sex means that sex is, to men, central to their lives; isolated from other aspects of life and relationships; often coupled with aggression; conceptualized socially within a framework of success and achievement; and pursued despite possible negative emotional and moral consequences. Sexual inexperience is viewed as stigmatizing. Examples of male nonrelational sexuality abound according to the critics. Men think about sex more often than women; have more explicit sexual fantasies; masturbate more often than women; buy more porn; have more sex partners; and, have more varied sexual experiences than women (Billy et al., 1993; Laumann et al., 1994).

In a recent edited volume on this problem, psychologist Gary Brooks (1995) pathologizes male sexual problems as a "centerfold syndrome." Symptoms include: voyeurism, objectification, sex as a validation of masculinity, trophyism, and fear of intimacy. Ron Levant contributes a medical neologism, *alexithymia*, to describe the socially conditioned "inability to feel or express feelings" (1997, p. 19). This problem must be serious; after all, it has a Greek name. Some authors also note the danger to women by men who have this type of "masculine" sex, who "deny the humanity of their partners, and . . . objectify and even violate the partner who is actually treated more as a prop." Others warn of "the damage ultimately done to men when they are socialized in a way that limits their ability to experience intimacy" (Johnston, 1997, pp. 79, 101).

Not all the studies of male nonrelationality are so critical. Psychologists Glenn Good and Nancy Sherrod argue that for many men nonrelational sex is a stage of development, not necessarily a way of being:

Men progress through the NS [nonrelational sexuality] stage by mastering the developmental tasks associated with this stage . . . [which] includes gaining experience as a sexual being, gaining experience with interpersonal aspects of sexuality, developing identity, and developing comfort with intimacy. Men following this route develop internally directed senses of their behavior that allow them to form and sustain intimate, caring relationships with others.

In fact, Good and Sherrod argue, experience with nonrelational sexuality may be a positive experience, allowing adolescents "to reduce sexual tensions" and "gain sexual experiences, refine skills associated with sexual activities, and experience different partners and behaviors, thereby reducing curiosity about different partners in the future" (Good & Sherrod, 1997, pp. 189, 190).

The idea of nonrelational sex as a "problem" for men is relatively recent, and is part of a general cultural discomfort with the excesses of the sexual revolution. In the 1970s, as Martin Levine and Richard Troiden point out, the significant sexual problems were problems stemming from too little sexual

experience—anorgasmia (the inability to achieve orgasm), especially for women, ejaculatory and erectile problems for men. Now the problem is sex “addiction,” a relatively new term that makes having a lot of sex a problem, and “nonrelational sex,” which makes pursuing sexual pleasure for its own sake also a problem. While it may be true that nonrelational sexuality may be a problem for some men, especially for those for whom it is the only form of sexual expression, it is not necessarily the only way men express themselves sexually. Many men are capable of both relational and nonrelational sexuality. Some men don’t ever practice nonrelational sexuality because they live in a subculture in which it is not normative; other men develop values that oppose it (Good & Sherrod, 1997, p. 186). One possibly worthy goal might be to enlarge our sexual repertoires to enable both women and men to experience a wide variety of permutations and combinations of love and lust, without entirely reducing one to the other—as long as all these experiences are mutually negotiated, safe, and equal.

Homosexuality as Gender Conformity

Thus far, I’ve been describing the ways in which men and women are socialized toward “his” and “her” sexualities. I’ve deliberately avoided the obvious disclaimer that I was speaking about heterosexuality and not homosexuality, because this gendering of sexuality is as applicable to homosexuals as it is to heterosexuals. In fact, it may even be *more* obvious among gay men and lesbians, because in homosexual encounters there are two gendered men or two gendered women. That is, you have masculinity or femininity multiplied by two! Gender differences may even be exaggerated by sexual orientation.

This is, of course, contrary to our commonsense understandings of homosexuality, as well as those biological studies that suggest that gay men have some biological affinity to women, as opposed to heterosexual men. Indeed, our commonsense assumption is that gay men and lesbians are gender *nonconformists*—lesbians are “masculine” women; gay men are “feminine” men. But such commonsense thinking has one deep logical flaw—it assumes that the gender of your partner is more important, and more decisive in your life, than your own gender. But our own gender—the collections of behaviors, attitudes, attributes, and assumptions about what it means to be a man or a woman—is far more important than the gender of the people with whom we interact, sexually or otherwise. Sexual behavior, gay or straight, confirms gender identity.

That doesn’t mean that these commonsense assumptions haven’t completely saturated popular discussions of homosexuality, especially in those advice books designed to help parents make sure that their children did not turn out “wrong.” For example Peter and Barbara Wyden’s book *Growing Up Straight: What Every Thoughtful Parent Should Know About Homosexuality*, argued that “pre-homosexual” boys were identifiable by their lack of early childhood masculinity, which

could be thwarted by an overly “masculine” mother, that is, one who had a job outside the home and subscribed to feminist ideas (Wyden & Wyden, 1968).

A few empirical studies have also made such claims. For example, psychiatrist Richard Green tracked a small group of boys (about 55) from preschool to young adulthood. All the boys were chosen for patterns of frequent cross-dressing at home. They liked to play with girls at school, enjoyed playing with dolls, and followed their mothers around the house doing housework. Their parents were supportive of this behavior. These “sissy boys,” as Green called them, were four times more likely to have homosexual experiences than nonfeminine boys. But this research has also been widely criticized: Such gender nonconformity is extremely rare (there was great difficulty in finding even 55 boys), and thus cannot be the source of the great majority of homosexual behavior. Extreme patterns of nonconformity are not equivalent to milder measures, such as not liking sports, preferring music or reading, and indifference to rough-and-tumble play. The homosexual experience may be a result of the social reactions to their conduct (persecution by other boys, or the therapy to which they were often exposed), which thwarted their ability to establish conventional heterosocial patterns of behavior. It may have been the ostracism itself, and not the offending behavior, that led to the sexual experiences. When milder forms of gender nonconformity are examined, most boys who report such behavior turn out to be heterosexual. Finally, when studies by Green and his colleagues were extended to “tomboys,” it was found that there was no difference in eventual sexual preference between girls who reported tomboy behavior and those who did not. What I think Green found is that being a sissy is a far more serious offense to the gender order than being a tomboy (Green, 1986).

The evidence points overwhelmingly the other way, that homosexuality is deeply gendered, and that gay men and lesbians are true gender conformists. To accept such a proposition leads to some unlikely alliances, with gay-affirmative writers and feminists lining up on the same side as an ultraconservative writer like George Gilder, who, in his unwavering critique of masculinity—both gay and straight—writes that lesbianism “has nothing whatever to do with male homosexuality. Just as male homosexuals, with their compulsive lust and promiscuous impulses, offer a kind of caricature of typical male sexuality, lesbians closely resemble other women in their desire for intimate and monogamous coupling” (Gilder, 1985).

Since the birth of the gay liberation movement in the Stonewall riots of 1969—when gay men fought back against the police who were raiding a New York City gay bar—gay men have been particularly eager to demonstrate that they were not “failed” men, as earlier popular images portrayed them. In fact, many gay men became extremely successful as “real” men, enacting a hypermasculine code of anonymous sex, masculine clothing, and physical appearance, including bodybuilding. The “clone” as he was called, comprising about 35 percent of all gay men, was perhaps even more successful at masculinity than were straight men. By the

early 1980s, this notion had produced some curious inversions of traditional stereotypes. In one popular song from 1983, Joe Jackson commented on this:

See the nice boys, dancing in pairs
 Golden earring, golden tan, blow wave in their hair
 Sure they're all straight, straight as a line
 All the gays are macho, can't you see their leather shine?²

By contrast, the sexual lives of lesbians were quite different. For many lesbians, gay liberation did not mean sexual liberation. In the lesbian community, there was more discussion of "the tyranny of the relationship" than of various sexual practices; lesbian couples in therapy complained of "lesbian bed death," the virtual cessation of sexual activity for the couple after a few years. One woman told an interviewer:

As women we have not been socialized to be initiators in the sexual act. Another factor is that we don't have to make excuses if we don't want to do it. We don't say we have a headache. We just say no. We also do a lot more cuddling and touching than heterosexuals, and we get fulfilled by that rather than just the act of intercourse . . . Another thing is that such a sisterly bond develops that the relationship almost seems incestuous after a while. The intimacy is so great. We know each other so well. (Chapple & Talbot, 1989, p. 356)

While some lesbians did embrace a sexual liberationist ethic and sought arenas for sexual variety, most remained gender conformists.

This was underscored by the fact that feminism also played a large role in the social organization of lesbian life. During the early waves of the women's movement, lesbianism was seen as a political alternative, a decision not to give aid and comfort to the enemy (men). How could a woman be truly feminist, they asked, if she shared her life and bed with a man? The "political lesbian" represented a particular fusion of sexual and gender politics, an active choice that matched one's political commitment. "For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture," wrote one woman, "is an act of resistance." While of course not all lesbians are feminists, even this construct of political lesbianism is a form of gender conformity. If one resists gender inequality, political lesbians argue, then one must opt out of sexual relationships with men, and choose to be sexual only with women *because they are women*. Gender remains the organizing principle of sexuality—even a sexuality that is understood as a form of resistance to gender politics (Clarke, 1996, p. 155).

The weight of evidence from research on homosexuality bears out this argument that gay men and lesbians are gender conformists. Take, for example, the number of sexual partners. In one study, sex researchers found that most lesbians

reported having had fewer than 10 sexual partners, and almost half said they had never had a one-night stand. A 1982 survey of unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 29 found an average of 4.5 sexual partners over the course of their lives. But the average gay male in the same study had had hundreds of partners, many one-night stands, and more than a quarter of them reported a thousand or more partners. Masters and Johnson found that 84 percent of males and 7 percent of females had had between 50 and 1,000 or more sexual partners in their lifetimes; and that 97 percent of men and 33 percent of women had had seven or more relationships that had lasted four months or less. While 11 percent of husbands and 9 percent of wives in another study described themselves as promiscuous, 79 percent of gay men and 19 percent of lesbians made such a claim. Among heterosexual cohabitators, though, 25 percent of the men and 22 percent of the women described themselves as promiscuous. Gay men have the lowest rates of long-term committed relationships, while lesbians have the highest, and lesbians place much greater emphasis on emotional relationships than gay men. Thus, it appears that men—gay and straight—place sexuality at the center of their lives, and that women—straight or lesbian—are more interested in affection and caring in the context of a love relationship (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Masters, Johnson, & Kolodny, 1978; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 317).

Research on frequency of sexual activity bears this out. In one study, among heterosexual married couples, 45 percent reported having sex three or more times per week during the first two years of their marriage, and 27 percent of those married between two and ten years reported such rates. By contrast, 67 percent of gay men together up to two years, and 32 percent of those together two to ten years had sex three or more times per week. One-third of lesbians had sex three or more times per week in the first two years of their relationship; but only 7 percent did after two years. After 10 years, the percentages reporting sex more than three times per week were 18 percent for married couples, 11 percent for gay men, and 1 percent for lesbians. Nearly half the lesbians (47%) reported having sex less than once a month after ten years together (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). One interviewer described a lesbian couple:

She and her roommate were obviously very much in love. Like most people who have a good, stable, five year relationship, they seemed comfortable together, sort of part of one another, able to joke, obviously fulfilled in their relationship. They work together, have the same times off from work, do most of their leisure activities together. They sent me off with a plate of cookies, a good symbolic gesture of the kind of welcome and warmth I felt in their home. (Bell & Weinberg, 1978, p. 220)

If heterosexuality and homosexuality are so similar, in that men and women express and confirm their gendered identities through sexual behavior, what then are the big differences between heterosexuals and homosexuals—aside, of course,

from the gender of the partner? One difference is that gay relationships are more egalitarian. When we ask, for example, who initiates sex, gay men and lesbians report identical rates, which are far more egalitarian than the rates for married or cohabiting couples. Because homosexuals' identities are defined by their sexuality, and because their sexuality is not procreative, gay men and lesbians have also been more sexually experimental, especially with nonpenetrative sex. As one sex therapist writes, "gay men have more ways of sexually relating than do heterosexual men" (see Nichols, 1987). And Masters and Johnson found that gay couples have longer lovemaking sessions than heterosexual couples.

One other way that heterosexuality and homosexuality are similar, actually, is in the impact of homophobia on sexual behavior. Obviously, for gay people homophobia saturates all their interactions. The systematic devaluation of homosexuality, the stigma attached to being homosexual, becomes a crucial element in one's identity. As sociologist Ken Plummer writes (1975, p. 102):

the perceived hostility of the societal reactions that surround . . . homosexuality . . . renders the business of becoming a homosexual a process that is characterized by problems of access, problems of guilt, and problems of identity. It leads to the emergence of a subculture of homosexuality. It leads to a series of interaction problems involved with concealing the discreditable stigma. And it inhibits the development of stable relationships among homosexuals to a considerable degree.

We know how homophobia constructs gay experience, but we are less aware of the power of homophobia to structure the experiences and identities of heterosexuals. Homophobia is more than the fear or hatred of homosexuals; it is also, for men, the fear of being perceived as unmanly, effeminate, or, worst of all, gay. These fears seem less keen among heterosexual women, though many worry about the dangers of homosexuals (nearly always men) to their children. Male heterosexuals often spend a significant amount of time and energy in masculine display so that no one could possibly get the "wrong" impression about them. In one study, many heterosexual men said they had sex in order to prove they weren't gay (Muelenhard, 1988). Since our popular misperceptions about homosexuality usually center on gender inversion, compensatory behaviors by heterosexuals often involve exaggerated versions of gender stereotypic behaviors. In this way, homophobia reinforces the gender of sex, keeping men acting hypermasculine and women acting ultrafeminine. "Heterosexuality as currently construed and enacted (the erotic preference for the other gender) requires homophobia," write sex researchers John Gagnon and Stuart Michaels (1989, p. 2).³

With the onset of the HIV epidemic, major changes occurred in the sexual patterns of gay men, including fewer partners, less anonymous sex, and increases in the practice of safer sex and the number of gay male couples. The emphasis on "safer sex" was seen by many as an effort to "feminize" sexuality, to return it to the

context of emotional and monogamous relationships, thus abandoning the earlier gay liberationist ethic of sexual freedom. To men, the very phrase “safe sex” was experienced as an oxymoron: what’s sexy—heat, passion, excitement, spontaneity—was the exact opposite of what’s safe—soft, warm, cuddly. Many men feared that practicing safe sex would mean no longer having sex like men, and that programs encouraging such gender nonconformity would be doomed to failure. This is not simply an issue for gay men, of course. Heterosexual women have been trying to get heterosexual men to practice a form of safe sex for decades, finding that their own sexual expressivity is less encumbered when both partners take responsibility for birth control. Fear of pregnancy and fear of HIV transmission both require that one fuse sexual pleasure with sexual responsibility (Levine, 1998).

Critics needn’t have worried. Much of the work to minimize the risk for HIV among gay men has been to reaffirm masculine sexuality, to develop ways that men could still have “manly” sex while they also practiced safe sex. Gay organizations promoted safe sex clubs, pornographic videos, and techniques. As a result, gay men did begin to practice safe sex, without disconfirming their masculinity, though there is some evidence of recent backsliding by younger gay men, especially since HIV treatments now seem to augur longer and healthier lives for HIV-positive people than they previously enjoyed.

Nonetheless, AIDS remains a highly “gendered” disease. Although women and men are both able to contract the virus that causes AIDS—in fact, women are actually more likely to contract the disease from unprotected heterosexual intercourse than are men—and despite the fact that rates of new infection among women are increasing faster than among men, the overwhelming majority (over 80%) of all AIDS patients in the United States are men. AIDS is the most highly gendered disease in American history—a disease that both women and men could get, but one that overwhelmingly disproportionately affects one gender and not the other. It would be useful to understand masculinity—risk-taking, avoidance of responsibility, pursuit of sex above all other ends—as a risk factor in the spread of the disease in the same way that we understand it to be a risk factor in drunk driving accidents (Kimmel & Levine, 1991).⁴

What Else Affects Sexuality?

While gender remains one of the organizing principles of sexuality, other aspects of our lives also profoundly influence our sexual behaviors and expectations. For one thing, sexual behavior, as we’ve seen, varies widely among different cultures. Margaret Mead found that in some cultures, the idea of spontaneous sex is not encouraged for either women or men. Among the Arapesh, she writes, the exceptions are believed to occur in women. “Parents warn their sons even more than they warn their daughters against permitting themselves to get into situations in which someone can make love to them” (Mead, 1935, p. 161). Another anthropologist

reported that in one southwest Pacific society, sexual intercourse is seen as highly pleasurable and deprivation as harmful to both sexes. And Bronislaw Malinowski saw significant convergence between women and men in the Trobriand Islands, where women initiate sex as often as men, and where couples avoid the “missionary” position because the woman’s movements are hampered by the weight of the man so that she cannot be fully active.

In the contemporary United States, several variables other than gender affect sexuality, such as class, age, education, marital status, religion, race, and ethnicity. Take class, for example. Kinsey found that, contrary to the American ideology that holds that working-class people are more sensual because they are closer to their “animal natures,” lower class position did not mean hotter sex. In fact, he found that upper- and middle-class people were more sophisticated in the “arts of love,” demonstrating wider variety of activities and greater emphasis on foreplay, while lower-class people dispensed with preliminaries and did not even kiss very much.

There is evidence that race and ethnicity also produce some variations in sexual behavior. For example, blacks seem to hold somewhat more sexually liberal attitudes than whites and have slightly more sex partners, but they also masturbate less frequently, have less oral sex, and are slightly more likely to have same-sex contacts. Hispanics are also more sexually liberal than whites, and masturbate more frequently than blacks or whites; but they also have less oral sex than whites (yet more than blacks) and have fewer sex partners, either of the same or opposite sex, than whites or blacks (Laumann et al., pp. 518–29, 177, 192, 82–84, 98, 302–09).

Age also affects sexuality. What turns us on at 50 will probably not be what turned us on at 15. Not only are there significant physiological changes that augur a decline in sexual energy and interest, but age is also related to marital status and family obligations. As Lillian Rubin writes,

On the most mundane level, the constant negotiation about everyday tasks leaves people harassed, weary, irritated, and feeling more like traffic cops than lovers. Who’s going to do the shopping, pay the bills, take care of the laundry, wash the dishes, take out the garbage, clean the bathroom, get the washing machine fixed, decide what to eat for dinner, return the phone calls from friends and parents? When there are children, the demands, complications and exhaustion increase exponentially. (p. 165)

Ah, children. By far one of the greatest anaphrodesiacs—sexual turn-offs—in our society is having children. Couples—gay and straight—with children report far less sexual activity than couples without children. There’s less time, less freedom, less privacy—and less interest.

You’ve probably heard reports that women hit their sexual peak in the late 30s and early 40s, while men peak before they turn 20, after which they are increasingly likely to appreciate softer, more sensual activities. And you’ve probably heard that such differences reveal biological differences in male and female

sexual anatomy. But that ignores the ways in which women's and men's sexualities are related to each other. That "his" sexuality shifts toward the more sensual just as "her" sexuality takes a sharp turn toward the explicitly sexual indicates more than a simple divergence in biological patterns, especially since it is not the case in other cultures when men and women biologically age "differently." What these reports suggest is that marriage has a pronounced effect on sexual expression, domesticating sex, bringing it into the domain historically reserved for women: the home. When men feel that sex is no longer dangerous and risky (which is, to them, exciting), their sexual repertoire may soften to include a wider range of sensual pleasures. When women feel that sex is no longer dangerous and risky (which they interpret as threatening), they feel safe enough to explore more explicitly sexual pleasures. Such an interpretation suggests, of course, that the differences we observe between women and men may have more to do with the social organization of marriage than with any inherent differences between males and females.

Yet despite this, the longer range historical trend over the past several centuries has been to sexualize marriage, to link the emotions of love and nurturing to erotic pleasure within the reproductive relationship. Thus sexual compatibility and expression have become increasingly important in our married lives, as the increased amount of time before marriage (prolonged adolescence), the availability of birth control and divorce, and an ethic of individual self-fulfillment have combined to increase the importance of sexual expression throughout the course of our lives.

Gender differences persist in our sexual expression and our sexual experiences, but they are far less significant than they used to be, and the signs point to continued convergence. It may come as a relief to realize that our lovers are not from other planets, but are capable of the same joys and pleasures that we enjoy. True, differences remain between women and men—to which we might say, "Vive les differences"—however modest and however much their significance is declining!