

Gender Matters

Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity by Brenda J. Allen (Waveland Press, 2011)

Salespersons sometimes refer to me using masculine terms by saying things like, "I'll be right with you, sir," or "I need to help him first." They usually are interacting with a coworker or another customer, or otherwise distracted. Their peripheral vision registers a tall person with short hair, and they assume I am a man. Once they really look at me and realize their mistake, they apologize profusely. One woman moaned, "I feel soooo stupid." I take it in stride because I understand what has happened. One time, though, a cashier looked right at me as she handed me change and said, "Thank you, sir." Now that irritated me. I wanted to correct her, to proclaim that I am a woman. I mean, didn't she notice that I was wearing lipstick and earrings; didn't she see my curves; didn't she hear my feminine vocal tones?

Why do you think I was upset when she didn't recognize that I was a woman? Why do you think people who realized their error were so apologetic? Do you think they would have been more, or less, upset if they had mistaken a man for a woman? Why? A friend of mine who is a lesbian also experiences these types of interactions, although much more frequently because she doesn't wear makeup, and she wears masculine clothing. Another one of my friends is a male-to-female transgendered person who gently corrects service workers when they refer to her using masculine pronouns. One time she did that, a male security guard replied: "OK. Thank you, SIR," putting strong emphasis on the word, "sir." These experiences imply a few matters related to gender that this chapter covers.

Gender is a defining element of everyday interactions, across all social contexts as we routinely rely on verbal and nonverbal cues to "do gender," usually without thinking about it.¹ That is, we enact learned, scripted gender roles. Signs and signals of gender are so ever-present that "we usually fail to note them—unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status."² Most of us have a clear, strong sense of our gender that we expect others to acknowledge. Also, individuals sometimes discriminate against others because of their gender.

In this chapter, I explore various matters related to communicating gender to illustrate power relations between and among women and men. I begin by defining gender and distinguishing it from sex, after which I elaborate on

why gender matters. Next, I describe how sex and gender have been socially constructed in the United States, and I discuss dominant value systems about gender. Then, I offer a historical overview of gender and labor in the United States. I also explain ways that individuals and groups have challenged perspectives on gender and their consequences. After that, I spotlight educational systems as significant sites of hegemony where we teach and learn about social identities. Finally, I review research on communicating gender, including a discussion about the role of emotion at work. Throughout the chapter, I illustrate that gender and power matter to how women *and* men communicate social identity.

What Is Gender?

What is your sex? What is your gender? Do you think of them as two different ways to say the same thing about yourself? Although many people use the terms interchangeably, gender and sex are distinct though related facets of identity. *Sex* is a biological classification. Humans universally tend to label a newborn as either “female” or “male.” They designate a baby’s sex based on physiological features related to reproduction, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones.³ This classification system reflects an essentialist view that stable, innate differences exist between the two sexes. This logic supports the idea that females and males are polar opposites, and that they serve different, complementary roles in society, which leads us to the concept of gender. Gender classifications are based on a “web of socially constructed meanings that differentiate humans on the basis of perceived physical, social, and psychological characteristics.”⁴ Those classifications depend on societal views of relationships of female to woman and male to man. Thus, *gender* refers to cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. In current popular usage, the word *gender* encompasses both biological and socio-cultural aspects of identity, while *sex* generally means sexual intercourse.⁵

Most cultures uphold customary conceptions of what women and men are “supposed” to be like. We learn at an early age how to “do gender,” based usually on our sex. For instance, we are told that “Boys don’t cry,” or “Girls should be nice.” Did anyone ever tell you either of those things? Gender norms vary across cultures, and they change throughout history. For instance, some languages don’t have gender-linked terms for boys and girls or for older people. Some societies classify multiple genders, while others are genderless.⁶ And, members of some groups honor individuals who personify multiple genders.

To conclude, sex is based on biology and genetics, while gender is culturally and relationally determined. Thus, “gender is not something we have, but something that we do, over and over again in one setting or another. And these settings are not neutral ground but saturated with gendered assumptions and expectations.”⁷