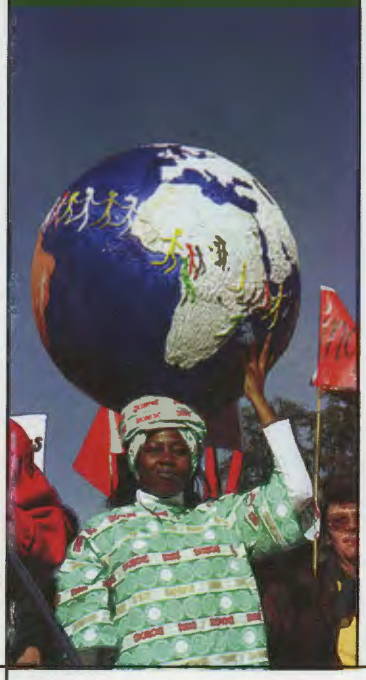

GENDER THINK

By: Ada M. Sanders

For most people gender is a "woman thing." The pervasiveness of this perception was evident in the 34 females to one male enrollment ratio for the Sociology of Gender seminar I took in the Fall Semester of 2005. To be honest, before taking the course, my own views on gender were very vague. However, I can tell you that they were closely associated with my personal opinions on masculinity and femininity. But, during the course of the semester we were challenged to investigate and evaluate our personal views of gender, as well as the gendered scripts of the society we live in. The investigation provided a new vantage point where gender is presented, not as a personal perception, but, as a construct. Within the construct, my own vague notions of gender gave way to powerful culture-bound conventions; these roles, behaviors, and relationships touch every aspect of life. As a requirement of the course, the class completed three assignments, which helped us examine the construction of gender within the context of our own lives. The following essays are a result of that examination. So, I invite the reader to venture into the gender realm; for me this was a new experience. Finally I dared to go where I had never gone, and do what I had never done, think about gender.

#1 Gender Norms: Putting the Bass in Femininity

Gender is a powerful influence in shaping our lives. To a large degree, the essence of whom a person will become, as well as what life chances are available to them, is predetermined by behaviors and belief characteristics imposed by gender norms. As a student of sociology I am learning how gender norms are interwoven into the economic, political and social contexts of human existence. They impact at every level, macro and micro, influencing politics, religion, education, work, family, and personal relationships. These ideals of what is masculine or feminine do not just affect behavior and appearance, but can impact expectations of physiology as well. For example, we routinely make assumptions about whether an individual is male or female on the basis of how their voice sounds. It is from this perspective that I approach this assignment.

In the context of gender norms, everyone believes that they can distinguish between the speech of women and men. They do not sound the same – a person generally can tell a male's voice from a female's and certain beliefs are held about what constitutes "masculine" or "feminine" (or even "effeminate") speech. Men's voices are perceived as deep and low-pitched and women's as soft and of a higher pitch. But this is not always the case. I was born with a voice that is deep and resonant and often mistaken as male. The mistake usually happens on the phone, but not always. When this happens, I usually will correct the transgressor. No one is going to deprive me of any of those glorious feminine perks; after all they are my womanly birthright. Still, I decided that my voice, a naturally occurring violation of a gender norm, would provide me with the perfect experiment of the masculine versus the feminine. What I experienced surprised me.

Since I was trying to get an extended warranty on my car; I decided to use this opportunity to observe any differences in the way men and women are treated. My intent was to use Judith Lorber's article, as a model; to test her "Believing is Seeing" theory. In other words, I wanted to know if an individual upon "believing" me to be either male or female would treat me differently; essentially "seeing" me as male or female (Lorber, p.14). So, I called a warranty company to ask for details on a warranty agreement. Please keep in mind that I am mistakenly identified as a man on the telephone most of the time. This happened on my first call, but I did not correct her immediately. Initially, she was very polite and professional. I let her continue the details of the warranty agreement for some time. But when in response to a question I had asked she called me sir for the eighth time I told her I was a woman. It is usual in these situations for whomever I am speaking with to apologize profusely and with much embarrassment. And, it was no different in this case; the overly copious apology implied that some great harm was caused by the misperception. More notable, though, was the change in her tone and manner. Still polite, she became more relaxed (friendlier and less professional). Before, when she believed I was a man, the information related was more detailed and technical. Now, that it was known that I was a mere woman, the content and depth of the information lessened; and so did my self-esteem. Also, there was a perceptible change in the pitch of her voice. It was lower, I would even venture to say less feminine. This was similar to the situation related in Karen Martin's "Becoming a Gender Body" article. The article examines how children are gender-socialized in preschools based on male/female differences.

Specifically, the author relates how the tone and pitch of teachers' voices change depending on whether they we talking to a little boy or girl (Martin, p.506). So, the receptionist's response to my voice was just the type of gendered difference I was hoping to observe; however, the feelings it invoked were unexpected.

While I approached the experiment purposely posing as a man, I felt somehow lessened by the difference in the way the sales associate spoke to me upon finding out I was female. When she thought I was male, her voice was higher in scale, parroting an intentionally cheerful and non-threatening professionalism. The fact

that I was perceived as male meant I was entitled to special handling. However, the most notable difference was the absence of any title; where before it was "sir" this and yes "sir" that, now that I was female not once did she address me as "ma'am or madam." Was she even aware of the shift in attitude? Conversely, if not for this class assignment, would I have noticed the shift? Still, there was an inherent sense of inequality; a feeling of being "not as good as." That it bothered me at all speaks to the emotional investment I have in regard to how my gender is perceived as male or female But most of all, it proves how innocuous gender constructs can be. Feminist Marilyn Frye compares the construct to the tines on a bird cage, "If you do not look right at it, it is not visible" (Frye, p.4). Also, for me, the experiment brought back past memories of anger and panic felt at times when some man who was obviously attracted to me, looks startled and inquiring upon first hearing me speak. My femininity questioned is thus threatened. Actually, our individual reactions testify to shared expectations in regards to gender norms; the belief that I "should" sound differently (i.e. feminine). Yet, therein lay the truth; the fact that my voice is perceived as male declares the "norm" false. After all, I was born with this voice and I am a female. Therefore, the idea that my voice should be soft and higher in pitch must be rooted in sociocultural expectations.

Raised to believe that "little girls should be seen, not heard" I can relate to Martin's argument that gendered bodies contribute to gender inequality (Martin, p.510). As a child, at first, I reveled in the power of possessing such a powerful voice. It seemed to me a great guarantor of attention. But that joy was soon turned to pain and apprehension. For the attention my voice garnered me was always accompanied by admonishment and the edict that little girls should be seen not heard. Of course, it was not the only mandate I received. There were the Halloweens when my sister and I were not allowed to go trick-or-treating any further than the block our house was on. And, we were not allowed to stay outside past a certain time. One might think of this as just "normal" parental concern, but this parental concern did not extend to my brothers. Similarly, this same discrepancy in parenting presented itself in the lives of my girlfriends. So, we learned to speak quietly and not assert ourselves. We learned to be afraid to explore places and situations outside the familiar; while our brothers learned the exact opposite. One has to wonder if boys and girls were reared and socialized in the same way, if they would be treated the same. Perhaps even my experiment with the receptionist would have turned out differently. Well, maybe not different, but certainly more equal.

#2 Body/Appearance Modifications: The Girdle: Forming Femininity

Me and my girdle. One must understand that, in 1966, all properly brought up young women wore girdles. When I was thirteen, after much harassment from me, my mother finally bought me my first girdle. At the time I weighed all of 95 pounds, so she felt buying me the girdle was a waste of good money. But, the fact that my sister, who was a year younger, had already been taken to Goldblatt's Department Store and fitted for a bra and a girdle was a major source of shame. And, there I was with plain panties and a trainer bra. Somehow my lack (skinny and boobless) set me apart and made me less, well, less feminine. I thought a girdle would transform me into a shapely paradigm of womanliness. Also, all my girlfriends had girdles, so it seemed a necessity, even urgent, that I have one too. How else was I to hold on to my tenuous place in the ranks of all those girdled feminine bodies? Well, was I right; did my girdle transform me? I honestly have to say that I do not know. After all, forty years have passed and I am no longer that girl. But after reading Victoria Pitts' book on body modification, In the Flesh, I was reminded of my yearning to be transformed by my girdle. Moreover, in that yearning exists a commonality with the body modifier's desire to "take control of what you otherwise could not." (Pitts, p.1).

Whether girdle wearing is a form of body modifications is debatable. In our society, the practice is seen, not as modification, but as an adjustment of appearance that exemplifies the Western cultural ideal of the feminine body. Victoria Pitts describes body modification as a

The GLBT (Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender) Resource Center of Michiana

We serve the GLBT community of the North Central Indiana and Southwest Lower Michigan. We are the place to get together with friends, have a cup coffee, play a game, read, or watch a movie
We host weekly and monthly support groups
We have monthly HIV testing and counseling that is free and confidential
We have the only Transgender group in this region
We have the largest variety of GLBT-oriented books and magazines in the region
We serve pure specialty coffee roasted by a GLBT and environmentally friendly roaster.

100 Center 100 N. Center St. Ste 32 • Mishawaka, IN 46544 • 574-254-1411
info@glbtmichiana.org • http://www.glbtmichiana.org

diverse array of body practices that, "emphasize bodily ***self-ownership***; personal, cultural and political expression through the body; and ***new possibilities for gender***, sexuality and even ethnic identity" (Pitts, p.14). This is in direct contrast to traditional to Western cultural ideals that emphasize conformity and the necessity to "fit in."

Moreover, body modifications often include expression of the spiritual, as well as the purely aesthetic. These body practices can range from the socially acceptable to the radical (e.g., ear and body piercing, tattoo, scarification and branding). Often though, the connotation of body modification is negative; with opponents of the more radical practices, such as scarring and branding, viewing them as subversive acts of disfigurement and mutilation.

Of course, girdle wearing could be considered body modification communicated in the broadest definition of the term, because it alters the body, albeit temporarily. But, rather than challenging body norms, girdle wearers are generally seeking conformity with an ideal. It's the Western cultural ideal of what a woman's, (and a man's according to "Guys in Girdles" website) body should look like physically; and how it should be presented. So, if not an alteration or modification with permanent consequences, perhaps girdle wearing would be more properly referred to as a feminine body project. And, femininity is all about gender.

What role do body practices such as girdle wearing play in the social construction of gender? A woman's conformity with a feminine self-identity is essential in our culture; it reinforces gender norms. The norm equates masculine to male and feminine to woman; anything contrary to this ideal is simply "not normal." Further, gender norms mandate the roles we typically play (i.e., masculine/husband/provider vs. feminine/wife/homemaker) in our society, as well as how we should behave (masculine/dominant vs. feminine/passive) and appear (masculine/hard/strong/muscular/immovable vs. feminine/petite/soft/curvy/yielding). However, as Judith Lorber exclaims, "Neither sex nor gender is a self-evident category." (Lorber, p.16) As a result, reinforcing the differences through body projects (i.e., hair, makeup, and clothing) becomes essential. For many women, this means shaping their bodies to cultural ideals of femininity.

Not surprising is the fact that the girdle was invented around 1910 by a man, French designer Paul Poiret. The girdle, or in today's language "shapewear," is a piece of women's underwear constructed of elasticized fabric, it is designed to shape and smooth a woman's figure. Simplicity facilitates this feminizing process, because a woman can accomplish this body transformation (with no help from anyone) by wearing a girdle under her clothing. Thus donned, the girdle nips the waist, flattens the stomach, rounds the butt and curves the hips; all the while slimming the female body into the "idyllic feminine" silhouette. The female body now displays a feminine gendered self-identity for all to see and believe. Feminist R.W. Connell notes, "gender is usually something done, and done in social life, not something that exists prior to social life" (Connell, p.37). Consequently, a woman donning a girdle is not being transformed, but simply performing gender.

More importantly, within the context of gender construction is the occurrence of gendered inequality. This inequality can be observed in women's opportunities that do not allow women to function productively outside of the society's gendered expectations. These expectations limit women's social and sexual relationships, employment opportunities and access to education in ways that oppress. Consequently, as Frye notes, "Women are caught like this, too, by networks of forces and barriers that expose one to penalty, loss or contempt whether one works outside the home or not, is on welfare or not, marries or not, stays married or not, is heterosexual, lesbian, both or neither." (Frye, p.3). As if the aforementioned is not enough, women also encounter gendered inequalities relating to clothing and appearance.

While I would never dispute a person's individual choice of appearance, wherever in the gender continuum he or she, or sie or hir might choose, one must recognize there is social power attached to gendered forms of clothing that must be reflected upon when looking at gender inequality. Consider the amount of time women spend pulling down their clothes, arranging and rearranging, paying constant attention to how you carry yourself, and the additional time spent in the bathroom "fixing up." The oppression of women has become embodied in the costumes we perform gender in. Today, most women are not running around in girdles; however the energy spent thinking about one's "feminine" appearance easily makes up for that lack of elastic restriction. In truth, I change from the sexless to the glamorously feminine all the time; what I had been unaware of are the gender structures inside of which I make that change.

#3 Gender, Relationships and Family: Hitting the G-Spot: Greetings and Gender

To conduct my research into greeting cards and gender I visited my local supermarket. The display is located near the checkout and, if you know the store layout, you can access them easily without running the impulse purchase traps they have set up throughout the store. Noticeably, the greeting card display in this store is substantially smaller (at about 8ft. in length and 5ft. in height) than in the larger Martin's stores. The display is divided into 8 major sections that contained multiple subsections. Notably, these subsections are primarily used to separate the cards into gendered categories. The majority of the cards, 60-70%, were for women (i.e., mother, grandmother, wife, daughter, sister, and niece). Moreover, the remaining cards were divided among male designations and "anyone." Even among the cards targeting males there were not as many male subsections as for those targeting females; and, in some cases there was no male representation at all. For example, in the Christmas cards there are cards for grandma (it is actually labeled grandma, not grandmother), but no section for grandpa.

Moreover, the cards could be easily identified as male or female by color and type of art work. For example, color schemes on cards for women or girls (purple, pink, light blue and yellow) contrasted with the more intense primary colors used in men and boys cards (dark green and blue, brown, orange and red. Art work was also distinctly different, whereas women's cards tended to be decorated with flowers, men's cards displayed sports, adventure, sexy women and mechanical images. Additionally, the images used for the male cards generally convey messages of physical strength, bravado and heterosexuality. The cards are notably lacking in any vulnerable emotions such as remorse and uncertainty, which are normally scripted as feminine characteristics.

Further, all the major sections do not have any cards that target same-sex couples or gay/lesbian individuals. The absence essentially makes same-sex and gay/lesbian individuals invisible, while at the same time reinforcing heteronormativity (Hyde and Jaffe, p. 290). Of course, gays and lesbians could choose the "anyone" category. Cards in this section are generally gendered. Hence, not only do greeting cards promote heterosexuality, but from a sociological perspective they also play to traditional gender roles. Card messages construct femininity around masculine power with language by describing women as sweet, delicate, and charming. In contrast, men (or their activities) are described with terms such as cool, brave, and strong. More evidence of gender stereotyping is found in examining graduation cards. Here girls' accomplishments are downplayed, instead emphasizing how wonderful the girls must feel. While the boy's graduation cards praise their achievements and encourage future aspirations.

Still, one might ask: Where's the harm? One of the problems is that greeting cards support negative gender norms. Cards reflect not only what the sender thinks about his or herself, but what they think about the person receiving the card. Further, these cards impact our perceptions of religion, education, work, family, and personal relationships. In these messages are the values that society places on people, not as human beings, but as either masculine males or feminine females. But, what happens when males do not act masculine and females do act feminine? Well, boys get labeled "effeminate" and girls are called "dykes." Card images reinforce what we can, and are expected to, accomplish as men and women. More importantly, they also blind us to the inequalities accompanying such perceptions. So, again, where's the harm? The harm lays in the continued portrayal of male dominance and female subordination as the natural order.

Interestingly, the majority of greeting card categories target women; male targeted cards weighed in at about 20%. This fact implies that men are buying the cards; but, according to Hallmark, women constitute 80% of the buyers of greeting cards (http://hallmark.com). So, who is really reinforcing the status quo? It would seem that women are! Perhaps, this is just denial. I do not mean to suggest that men have no responsibility in gender inequality; after all, last year the greeting card industry netted in excess of 5 billion dollars in profit.
That is big business and, big business always involves the old boy's network. In general, though, we deny just about everything that has any thing to do with gender. We deny that men get the big piece of the pie; we deny

"If you as parents cut corners, your children will too. If you lie, they will too. If you spend all your money on yourselves and tithe no portion of it for charities, colleges, churches, synagogues, and civic causes, your children won't either. And if parents snicker at racial and gender jokes, another generation will pass on the poison adults still have not had the courage to snuff out."

~Marian Wright Edelman

that everyone is not heterosexually inclined; we deny that biology is not a simple clear-cut case of either male or female. Still, denial has its function; it allows us to wear blinders. So instead of looking at gender inequality in the here and now, we visit Mars and Venus. Better yet, just run on over to the nearest greeting card display.

Reflections

In retrospect learning about all of this "gendering" business is sort of frightening; especially when considering some of the personal consequences. But certainly we can approach our futures more aware. In my own life the list of areas and aspects that gender impacts has grown exponentially: education, jobs, parenting, sexuality, behaviors, reactions, traits, characteristics, etc. Each aspect seems to give birth to another. More importantly, we are relegating what behaviors or appearances should (or should not) constitute masculine or feminine. What message does this send to our children? Are we teaching our boys to oppress and our girls to be victims? There is certain danger in allowing certain behaviors to go unchecked in boys, while girls are similarly disempowered by being encouraged not to speak out. Some might think this position extreme. Additionally, there have been many serious situations (often dangerous) where a woman's inability to speak out have had negative consequences. Could this be the result of the gender instructions inherent in our socialization? Also, one can observe in even the most open-minded of men the "I am superior" undertone in attitude. Often, there is the assumption that wives and girl-friends should unquestionably acknowledge their leadership, judgment and behavior. Of course, if the judgment or behavior is constructed and learned, there is nothing natural or automatic about it. Further, I have seen this attitude evident in the relationships of gay and lesbian couples; always in the partner perceived to be in the masculine role (whether male or female). Thus, it is not about "male and female" characteristics, but "masculine and feminine" gender constructs.

Is there such a word as "gendercentric"? If not, there should be. Most men believe that their behaviors (economic, social and political) and characteristics (emotional, spiritual and physical) are better than those of the opposite sex. We make great fuss of this but it goes much deeper; because when we limit one person we limit the whole of society. Where does the boundary between limit and oppression lay? Being a middle-aged Black female has given me the opportunity to personally experience the meaning of "oppression" in spheres both public and private. Often when considering the complexities of race one has the tendency to focus on individual aspects such as hate, bigotry, intolerance, education, culture, even upbringing. Of course, studying sociology has broadened that focus to include how the social contexts of function and structure impact race relations. So, it is natural for me to view the oppression of women in a similar manner. Studying gender constructs challenges one to look at the interrelatedness and view the whole picture. It urges us to put all the elements together so we can see how, and of what, it is constructed. And knowing "how" a thing is "constructed" may afford the understanding to deconstruct or change it.

Fortunately, there is a bright side to all this talk of gender and oppression, "change." If gender, ordered though it may be, is constructed then it is not fixed. Social categories are transient and shifting; I was Negro, Black, and now African-American. Maybe the gender categories will exhaust themselves through pressure, gradually or, to use Connell's language, "crisis tendencies." One thing is obvious; the ways in which we distinguish gender are no longer clear (hair, clothing, jewelry, personal product usage, etc.). Gender norms in regards societal roles are also changing (division of labor, parenting).

What used to seem "natural or normal" no longer applies. On the other hand, all social construction whether it be race, class, or gender is not just a strategy to maintain norms. It can also reflect the human effort to build something better.

Many times I have heard that gender is a social construction without considering what this means. What goes on within the structure of gender? More importantly, what kinds of relationships are practiced there? And, who benefits? Connell maintains that the relationships of power, production, emotion and symbols are not only ways to reinforce gender, but ways to practice oppression against women (Connell, p. 35). Still, categories can also be useful; they help us order our lives and prevent uncertain chaos. Truthfully, lives are under constant social construction. The key is to check the quality and content of the building materials. In doing so we enable all to contribute productively to society; race, age, sex and gender not withstanding.