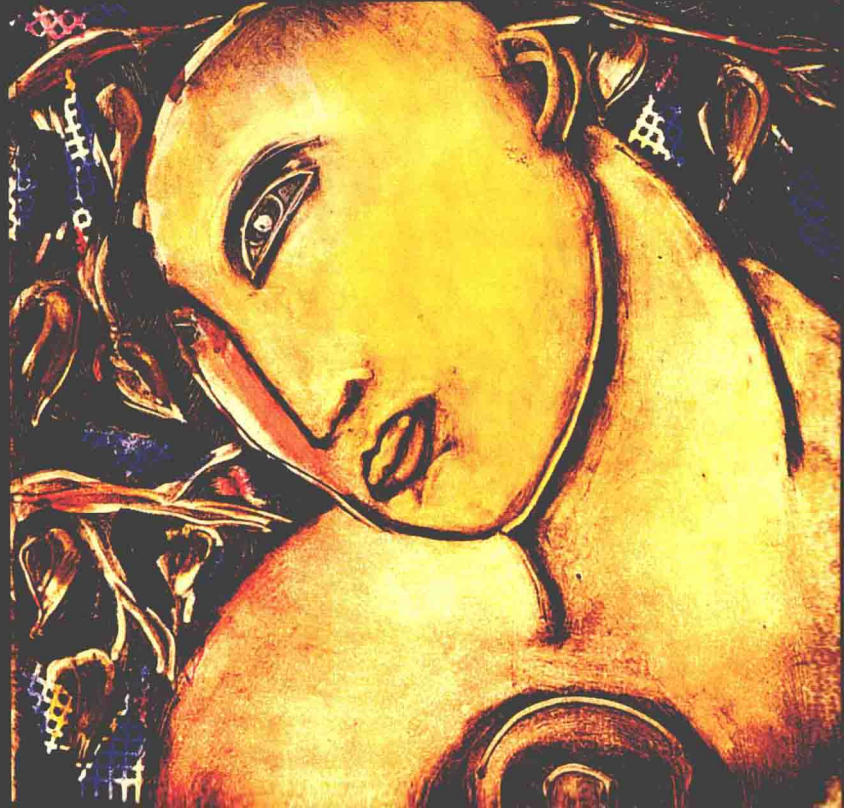
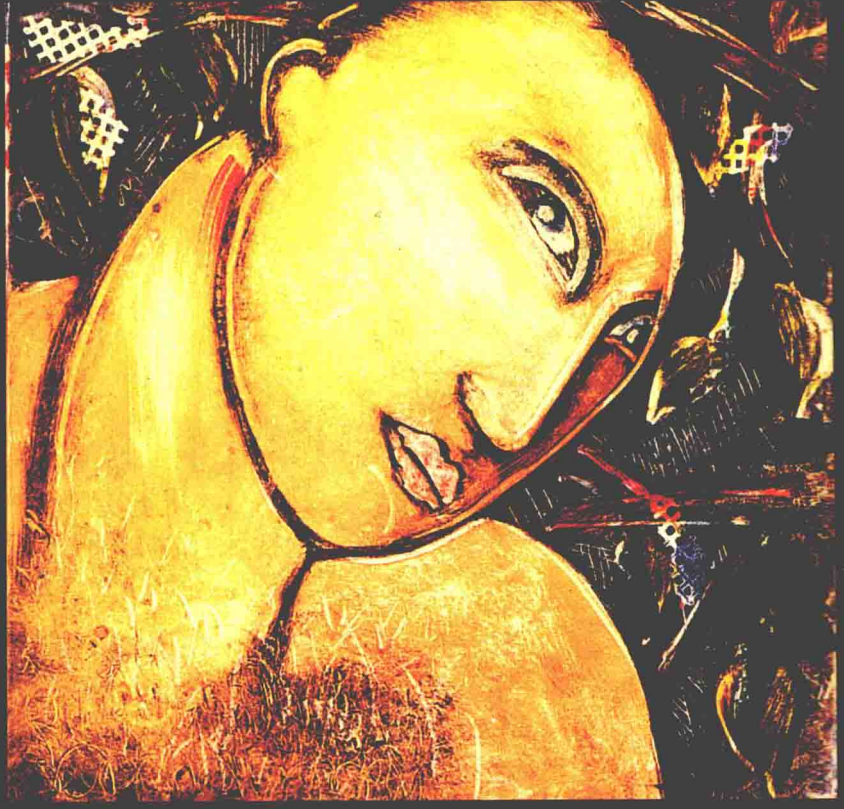


# Gender

*Psychological Perspectives*



Linda Brannon



*Third Edition*

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# *Gender*

*Psychological Perspectives*

**Linda Brannon**

*McNeese State University*

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## Preface

This book examines the topic of gender—the behaviors and attitudes that relate to (but are not entirely congruent with) biological sex. A large and growing body of research on sex, gender, and gender-related behaviors has come from psychology, sociology, biology, biochemistry, neurology, and anthropology. This research and scholarship form the basis for this book, providing the material for a critical review and an attempt to generate an overall picture of gender from a psychological perspective.

### *The Topic of Gender*

A critical review of gender research is important for several reasons. First, gender is currently a hot topic, and almost everyone has an opinion. These opinions are not usually based on research. Most people are not familiar with research findings; they simply know their own opinions. People's opinions are strongly influenced by their own experience and also by what they have seen in the movies, on television, and in other media. Whether these programs are news reports or fiction, both types of presentations make an impact. Based on these portrayals, people create images about how they believe women and men should be, and they attempt to re-create these images in themselves. In *Gender: Psychological Perspectives*, I present what gender researchers have found, although the picture is neither simple nor complete. Research findings are complex and sometimes contradictory, but I believe that it is important to understand this research rather than draw conclusions based only on personal opinions and popular media portrayals.

Second, research is a valuable way to understand gender, despite the bias and controversy that have surrounded the research process. Although scientific research is supposed to be objective and free of personal bias, this idealistic notion often varies from the actual research process. Gender research in particular has been plagued with personal bias. Despite the bias that can enter into the research process, I believe that research is the most productive way to approach the evaluation of a topic. Others disagree with this view, including some who are interested in gender-related topics. A number of scholars, especially feminist scholars, have rejected scientific research as the best way to learn about gender.

Although I agree that science has not treated women equitably, either as researchers or as participants in research, I still believe that science offers the best chance for a fuller understanding of gender (as well as of many other topics). Some scholars disagree with this view, but I want to make my point of view clear. My proscience orientation is the reason I have chosen to concentrate on research throughout the book—to examine what gender researchers have found and how they have interpreted their findings.

In this book the emphasis on gender is similar to another approach to studying gender—examining the psychology of women. The psychology-of-women approach concentrates on women and issues unique to women, whereas the gender approach focuses on the issue of gender as a factor in behavior and in the social context in which behavior occurs. Gender research and theory draw heavily from research on the psychology of women, but the emphasis differs.

By emphasizing women and their experience, the psychology-of-women approach often excludes men, but gender research cannot. Studying both women and men is essential to an understanding of gender. Researchers who are interested in gender issues may concentrate on women or men, but they must consider both, or their research reveals nothing about gender. Therefore, this third edition of *Gender: Psychological Perspectives* examines the research and theory from psychology and related fields in order to evaluate the behavior, biology, and social context in which both women *and* men function.

The gender approach also reflects my personal preferences: I want a psychology of women and men. When I was completing the first edition of this book, I attended a conference session on creating a course in psychology of women. Several instructors who had created such courses led a discussion group about obtaining institutional approval and the problems they had encountered, including resistance from administrators (who were mostly men) concerning a course in which the enrollment would be mostly women. One of the group advised trying for approval of a course on gender if obtaining approval for a psychology-of-women course was not successful. The implication was that the topic of gender included men and would be more acceptable but less desirable. I disagreed. I wanted men to be included—in the research, in my book, and in my classes. This desire comes from the belief that women and men are required in order to consider and discuss gender issues. I prefer the gender approach, and I wanted this book to reflect that attitude.

My interest in gender comes from two sources—my research and my experience as a female psychologist. The research that prompted me to examine gender issues more carefully was on risk perception related to health problems. I was interested in investigating people's perceptions of the health risks they created as a result of their behavior, such as the perceptions of health risks in smokers versus nonsmokers. In this research, I found that women and men saw their behaviors and risks in similar ways, even when the actual level of health risks did differ for men and women. My research showed gender similarities rather than gender differences.

In examining the volume of research on gender-related attitudes and behaviors, I discovered that many other researchers' findings were similar to mine. Among psychologists, exploration of gender seemed to show more similarities than differences, and when differences appeared, many were small. I came to doubt the widespread belief that men and women are opposites, and to consider that this view is, at the very least, overstated—women and men are more similar than different. Gender-related differences exist, but the tendency to concentrate on these differences has obscured the similarities.



As a female psychologist, I was forced to attend to gender issues from the outset of my career. Sexism and discrimination were part of the context in which I received my professional training and in which I have pursued my career as a psychologist. Women were a small minority in the field during my early years in psychology, but the numbers have since increased, so that now women receive over half the doctoral degrees granted each year in psychology. This increase and several antidiscrimination laws have produced some improvements in equitable treatment for women in psychology (as well as in other professions and in society in general).

The psychology-of-women approach came from women working in the field of psychology during the feminist movement that began during the 1960s. Those female psychologists wanted to make psychology more hospitable to women, so they created a field of study devoted to women. Although most of the women working in psychology have not been directly involved in the study of the psychology of women and some are not feminists, the presence of a growing proportion of women has made psychology more inclusive. This spirit of inclusiveness spread to issues of culture and sexual orientation, and made psychology of gender not only possible but, I think, inevitable.

## ***Gendered Voices***

Although I believe that research is a good way to understand behavior, including gender-related behavior, this point is controversial. On one side of this controversy are some feminist scholars who believe that traditional science is not the best way to approach the study of women—or perhaps anything—and these scholars have proposed a set of alternative methods.

Rather than collecting quantitative data consisting of numbers, some researchers prefer data consisting of interviews and personal accounts. The latter approach has advantages and disadvantages (discussed more fully in Chapter 2), but Louise Kidder (1994) contends that one of the drawbacks is the vividness of the data generated by accounts of personal experience. Statistical compilations may be more representative, but people are more impressed by personal accounts. Qualitative methods of studying people do not lead to a comfortable blurring of the results. Rather, each person's account is sharply depicted, with no averaging to blunt the edges of the story.

The text of *Gender: Psychological Perspectives* consists of an evaluation of quantitative research findings—exactly the sort of information that people may find difficult to relate to their lives. I decided that I also wanted to include some personal, narrative accounts of gender-relevant aspects of people's lives, and I wanted these accounts to connect to the research studies. The perils of vividness seem small compared to the advantages. I believe that people's personal experiences are distilled in statistical research, but I also know that a lot of the interesting details are lost in the process.

These "Gendered Voices" narratives restore some of the details lost in statistical summaries, allowing men and women to tell about their personal experiences. Telling these stories, separated from the text, was an alternative approach to presenting information about gender and highlighting the relevance of research findings with vivid detail. Some of the stories are funny, showing a lighthearted approach to dealing with the frustrations and annoyances of discrimination and gender bias. Some of the stories are sad, revealing experiences of sexual harassment, violence, and abuse. All of the stories are real accounts, not

fictional tales constructed as good examples. When the stories are based on published sources, I name the people who are presenting their experience. For other stories, I have chosen not to name those involved, to protect their privacy. I listened to my friends and students talk about gender issues and wrote down what they told me, trying to report what they said in their own words. I hope that these stories give a different perspective and add a sense of the reality of gender in personal experience to the volume of research reported here.

## ***Headlines***

Long before I thought of writing a book about gender, I noticed the popularity of the topic in the media. Not only are the sexes the topic of many private and public debates, but gender differences are also the topic of many newspaper, magazine, and television stories, ranging from sitcoms to scientific reporting. I had read warnings about the tendency in the media to oversimplify research findings and to slant reports to give an incorrect impression about research. I wanted to examine the research on gender to try to understand what the research says, with all of its complexities, and to present the media version along with an analysis of the research findings.

Of particular concern to me was the tendency of the media and of people who hear reports of gender research to want to find a biological basis for the behavioral differences between the sexes, as though evidence of biologically based differences would be more “real” than any other type of evidence. The division of the biological realm from the behavioral realm is a false dichotomy. Even genes can be altered by environment, and experiences can produce changes in behavior as permanent as any produced by physiology. The view that biological differences are real and permanent, whereas experience and culture produce only transient and changeable effects, is a popular myth.

Unlike some other books about gender, this book spends several chapters examining this biological evidence. As Naomi Weisstein (1982) said, “biology has always been used as a curse against women” (p. 41). I want to present and evaluate this research because it is the basis of popular assumptions and media reports about differences between the sexes, and also because people accept these findings without question. I want readers to question the extent to which the biological “curse” should apply.

To further highlight the popular conceptualizations of gender, I decided to use headlines from newspapers and popular magazines as a way to show how gender is presented by the media. Some of the headline stories are examples of responsible journalism that seeks to present research in a way that is easy to understand, whereas other headline stories are more sensational or simplified.

My misgivings about the media were dramatically confirmed by a personal experience. As I was beginning to write about chromosomes, hormones, and sex differences in the brain that relate to mental abilities, a student approached me, wanting to interview me for the student newspaper. She was taking a journalism class in which she had to write a story about the differences between men’s and women’s brains, so a friend had recommended me as a good interview source. I explained to her that the relationship between brain structures and behavior was complex and difficult to establish, and most of the research was based on rat brains rather than human brains, so making generalizations was tricky. She said she wanted some statistics about differences, and she knew such statistics existed. When I explained that statistics on the frequency of occupations or performance differences between men and

women do not necessarily reveal brain differences, she said she was not interested in knowing the truth—she just wanted information for her story!

A journalism student's disregard for the truth does not condemn all journalists; however, the media does sometimes give in to the urge to portray findings in sensational ways because such stories get attention. Such sensationalism distorts research findings and perpetuates stereotypical thinking about the sexes. I believe that Beryl Lieff Benderly (1989), a science reporter, was correct when she warned about media sensationalism of gender research by writing the headline, "Don't believe everything you read..." (p. 67).

### ***According to the Media/According to the Research***

In addition to gender in the headlines, I have included a boxed feature called "According to the Media/According to the Research" that concentrates on gender portrayals in the mainstream media. "According to the Media" boxes examine how gender is portrayed in the various media—magazines, television, movies, video games, cartoons, and fiction. "According to the Research" boxes provide research findings related to the media topics, offering a more systematic and unbiased view. The contrast of these two presentations provides an opportunity to examine gender bias and stereotyping in the media. I hope this feature leads students to question the accuracy and fairness of the thousands of gendered images that they experience through the media.

### ***Considering Diversity***

The history of psychology is not filled with a concern for diversity or an emphasis on diversity issues, but these topics represent an area of increasing interest and concern within psychology. Indeed, gender research is one of the major fields that represents the growing diversity in psychology. In addition, cross-cultural research has begun to provide a more comprehensive picture of psychological issues in the context of different ethnic groups within the United States as well as comparisons to other countries.

To highlight this developing research and tie it to gender issues, this edition of *Gender: Psychological Perspectives* includes a section in each chapter called "Considering Diversity" that discusses diversity research. Although diversity issues enter the text at other points in the book, the creation of a section to examine diversity ensures that these important issues are considered. In some chapters, the research is sufficiently developed to present a cross-cultural review of the topic. For other topics, cross-cultural research remains sparse, so those diversity sections present a specialized topic that relates to the chapter.

### ***Acknowledgments***

At the completion of any book, authors have many people to thank, and I am no exception. Without the assistance, support, and encouragement of many people, I never could have written this book or completed the third edition. I thank all of them, but several people deserve special mention. My colleagues in the psychology department at McNeese State University were supportive and helpful. Jess Feist, my coauthor on the fourth edition of *Health Psychology: An Introduction to Behavior and Health*, provided advice and improved my



writing of this book. Patrick Moreno not only acted as librarian to help me obtain material but also surfed the Net on my behalf. Their assistance was very important in completing this edition.

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I would like to thank all the people who told me their personal stories for the "Gendered Voices" feature of the book. To respect their privacy I will not name them, with one exception: Melinda Schaefer deserves special thanks because her story was so good that hearing it made me realize that others had stories to tell. Without her story, I would not have realized how important these accounts are.

Husbands often deserve special thanks, and mine is no exception. My husband, Barry Humphus, did a great deal to hold my life together while I was researching and writing—he kept the computer working and offered me his praise, support, and enthusiasm. I would not have attempted (much less completed) this book without him.

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# Chapter 1

## The Study of Gender

### HEADLINE

#### *The New Gender Wars*

*Psychology Today*, November/December, 2000

*The latest skirmish in the war between the sexes has flared up between psychologists studying the origins of gender differences. Research has shown that despite feminist advancements, gender differences persist. The question no longer is whether there are differences between the sexes but what to make of them.*

*On one side are those who claim that it is evolution and biology that make us significantly different, and that no amount of feminist agitation will change that. Men will continue to be philandering, non-nurturing and sex-focused, and women will continue to be mothering keepers-of-the-hearth. On the other side are those who claim there's a lot more variation to our gender roles. Society, they say, and not our genes, determines how we react to our biological course. Change, this latter group says, is possible and evident.*

*How willingly does our biology respond to our environment? And even if biology plays a role, how much of the male-female split is nonetheless reinforced by the culture we live in?... Where do these differences come from and where might they go? (Blustain, 2000, p. 43)*

Sarah Blustain's (2000) article presented the two sides of one current version of the "battle between the sexes." This conflict lies within psychology, and, as the title of Blustain's article suggests, this "war" is a new one, only dating back to the mid 1990s. At that time evolutionary psychology began to capture headlines proclaiming that differences between men's and women's behavior can be traced to evolutionary history, and recent changes in society will make little difference in women's and men's behavior.

Evolutionary psychology holds the **essentialist view** that biology is the basis for differences between the sexes. According to most people's views of the relationship between biology and behavior, biological differences determine behavior. Therefore, if the