

Gender is the undoing of Marriage

Of all institutions, marriage has to be the most frequently tried that still consistently fails. The statistic has become so well-known that it's a wonder people are even trying these days!

We can blame divorce on our fragile humanity, the demands of modern family life, or women's liberation, but I have another explanation: I believe gender itself is the undoing of marriage.

Your preparation for marriage really began the day you were born. It was your "maleness" or "femaleness" that determined what everyone thought of you. They "used your sex" to determine who you would come to be. They even color-coded you. You were either BLUE or PINK before you were born. Your name was chosen and your accomplishments predicted. So much was known about you, and yet no one knew you at all! So, begins the story of gender.

Because of our "separate" sex, men and women are expected to be "separate and very different" people. The training provided by parents and demanded by culture constantly surrounds us. Our separate worlds are presumed to be NORMAL. Is it any wonder that by the time of marriage we can't figure each other out? Gender creates a huge divide between men and women, NOT because they are genetically different, but because our differences became ideals to live by long ago. This background of "differences created by gender" makes it difficult for men and women to tolerate marriage.

Are the difference between men and women biological or cultural?

Keep in mind that what we know from research have resulted from studies on individuals whose brain and identity are already "gendered".

From these studies we know, with inconclusive certainty, that: men and women have a different chromosomal make-up, different amounts of the same hormones that fluctuate later in life, and, of course, a different anatomy.

We know that men's brains are larger than women's brains, but we also know that brain size is not a predictor of intelligence since both sexes perform similarly on intelligence tests.

The brain size of girls peak at eleven and a half and peaks three years later for boys. We know that same areas of the brain mature faster in boys and some mature faster in girls, but as they age, their capabilities even out.

We do not know whether the brain is hardwired for gender differences or whether gender socialization makes us become biologically who we are expected to become personally.

Biology has not answered, with certainty, the source of our difference, but we know the pattern of difference between women and men can make them "intimate strangers" (AML).

Let me describe the polarizing psychological styles men and women are expected to internalize.

WOMEN

WOMEN are socialized to be very “connected” to others and shamed if they are not. Little girls are protected by their parents and presumed to need protection throughout their lives. As adults, daughters are expected to care for aging parents. Being cared for, and caring for others, is the way women are expected to be “connected.”

WOMEN want to be a bride. It is a childhood dream comes true. Every detail of the wedding is idealized. On her wedding day she is “honored” and “adored.” It is a “rite-of-passage” that is required for her happiness. She has played “house” her whole life and NOW, on her wedding day, all of her play is real. She is the envy of family and friends. She gets so much attention as a bride. Even though her life will change dramatically she is willing to endure the stress and sacrifice that is required. Other than “motherhood,” being a “bride” is the most idealized dream of any woman’s life.

WOMEN combine the ideal of marriage with the ideal of motherhood. Although being a stay-at-home mom is less and less the reality for the 21st century woman, she still holds this 1950s ideal high as a standard of care. She is more than ready to be taken care of by her husband as she takes care of him and their children. Though most women work today and care for their children, they hold the idea of NOT working as a higher ideal even if that means putting their career aside, being financially dependent and sometimes less valued. If she required working for the financial stability of the family, she may view her husband as inadequate and feel deprived of her dreams. A woman’s orientation to be a “Giving Tree” is more powerful than to be her-own-person. Gender makes it so.

WOMEN are usually unable to separate how they feel toward their husband from what they share with him sexually. If they are troubled with each other, she will be turned-off to him.

She wants sex to be a “lovemaking experience” more than a sexually gratifying experience. After child-birth, her interest in sex may change dramatically, because her energies are more diffuse and mothering has become so important. She may find it difficult to be the “good-mother” and the “good-lover.” Since motherhood has always been her highest calling, it often fulfills her so completely that being her husband’s lover becomes secondary. Gender makes it so.

WOMEN see parenthood as a fulfillment more than a service. Playing with dolls and having their own play-kitchen have made them passionate about parenthood. It is parenthood that links every daughter to her mother and grandmothers. Parenthood is a woman’s legacy. Some women are eager to marry so they can be a parent, and being a parent motivates them to live in unhappy marriages — sometimes for a lifetime. They are willing to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to fill this role. As a culture, we do a very thorough job of conditioning women for PARENTHOOD.

WOMEN typically avoid the direct expression of anger. They will suppress and isolate the emotions instead. They may placate rather than confront. Even if they are uncomfortable or unhappy, they may choose to be silent. Their suppressed anger may be stored as a depression and convert to illness. She can become disenchanted with herself. Her confusion about “being loving” combines “love and sacrifice” in a tightly woven emotional formula that leaves her feeling that “Doing what is ‘right’” becomes more important to women than feeling right and being loyal to herself. Her ideals for love may be so rigid that they land her in a “chronic discontent” (AML) that leave her few options for peace. She may know it makes “no sense” but is powerless to change how she feels. Gender makes it so

MEN

MEN have a very different gender-agenda to guide his life and identity. Boys are taught to do what they please, be successful, prosperous, at-the-top-of-their-game and sexually active as soon as possible. He is given toys that promote active and creative play. They do not attach him to the ideals of caring or nurturing. We worry less about their safety and well-being because we believe that HE should be able to take care of himself. He knows that independence is equitable with manhood so he tries to "measure-up" even when he is scared and uncertain. He lives without the prolonged nurturing that his sister got because he's supposed to not need it. He learns to fear closeness to his mother, for too long a time, because it can hinder his masculinity. When he lets go of her he has no one to rely on because his father has never learned to connect with anyone, and believes that his son shouldn't need him. Boys who never learned to connect become disconnected fathers.

MEN are usually abandoned by their fathers and learn to live-on-their-own in a masculine world. This "separateness" will become, for the boy, a mantra for life. He will grow to depend on his "separateness" for safety, security, privacy, and emotional autonomy. It keeps everything about him a secret that he is in charge of. For this reason he will resist getting help when he needs it, resting when his body requires it, being vulnerable when love demands it. The boy-alone becomes the man-alone. He is given little emotional support from his father or other men, so he learns emotions are not necessary — they're a sign of weakness. Guidance from his father is direct, unemotional and absolute. The boy learns a no-nonsense way of life, which carries into marriage.

MEN use their sexuality in very different ways than women. They are encouraged to be sexual as a validation of their masculinity.

There is so much pressure to be "sexually" active that many boys will lie about their sexual performance rather than admit they "just haven't gotten laid yet." Protecting their virginity or waiting until they are ready for sex is a dilemma young men struggle to resolve. Too many young boys force sex with a female partner just because he feels the compulsion to prove his masculinity. This can cause a power-struggle with someone they are dating. He may view sex as an entitlement, not an agreement. He may see sex as a necessity for men and have little knowledge of a woman's body or interest in learning. He may be embarrassed to admit that he does not know what a woman requires for sexual fulfillment, and consequently may view sex as a performance rather than a sharing.

MEN may feel a great need for closeness and use sex to satisfy that need. Sex, therefore, can become separated from relationship, and therefore can become the BIG COVER-UP for the lonely man. This is not all bad, but it can, in later life, become a BIG PROBLEM, because it polarizes the meaning of sex away from a relational union with another. This separation — coupled with his preoccupation of "performing" sexually — becomes a pre-condition to infidelity and sexual addiction. This polarity can mean men want more from sex than sex can give, no matter how much they have. This can lead to loneliness, frustration and ultimately profound depression. Some men may be confused about its meaning throughout their lives.

MEN can view monogamy as a limitation or deprivation, not a concentration. They may feel that ONE sexual partner is limiting their masculinity too drastically, which justifies having a secret sex life OUTSIDE the relationship as their perfect right. If his relational self is immature, he may not be willing to recognize that what is concealed keeps him separated from his lover.

Exposing his OUTSIDE life may feel like being stripped of his manhood, until/or unless he sees the unhealthy sexual attitudes that have been dictating his life. After being exposed he may be impatient with his wife because she “just can’t forget it.” This attitude is indication that what caused the problem remains: the separation of sexual behavior and interpersonal life.

MEN cling to logic as a resolution to conflict and may be intolerant with emotional information that their wives want to share. Their black-and-white world seems perfectly logical to them and when others don't see it their way, they may use insults, denial, silence or rejection to ward off the challenge of deep conversation. Few men realize that socialization has separated them from their emotions, which ARE an essential part of human intelligence. The reincorporation of their emotional intelligence is threatening to most men, and that is one reason they may shun therapy or any self-help programs that encourage personal integration. Gender makes it so.

MARRAGE REDOS:

- (1) Understand how gender has affected both of you. This is not a “quick-fix” — this will be an “awakening”.
- (2) Don’t be SHOCKED to realize that you need to do marital therapy work. Be sure to select a therapist who understands how gender is undermining your marriage.
- (3) Be patient with yourselves. The internalization of gender cannot be overcome quickly but it must be done to preserve your marriage.
- (4) Husbands understand the socialization of WOMEN. This understanding of one another will build compassion between you.
- (5) Wives understand the socialization of MEN.
- (6) If a gender support group for couples is available, join one.
- (7) Discuss how you both feel about INFIDELITY. Define infidelity. Could it be interpersonal dating, internet sex, internet flirting etc.? Don’t think that love eradicates temptation and bad habits which were in place before you knew one another.
- (8) WOMEN have had more preparation for marriage than men. Those who expect partners to BE-LIKE-THEM will be setting themselves up for huge conflict. WOMEN will be stressed to take leadership positions in their marriage. Ask for what YOU want. Be willing to struggle about it if necessary.
- (9) MEN are more sexually liberated than women simply because they are NOT shamed about being pure sexually. Make sure HE feels comfortable knowing that YOU are NOT a virgin. Immature men expect their wives to be PURE for HIM. Talk about what you need sexually from one another. WOMEN, don’t assume that HE knows what feels good to you.
- (10) Discuss the SHARING of household responsibilities and child care. MEN usually feel that they should be exempt from such mundane tasks, but it is the sharing of those tasks that make you both partners-in-life. Men need to dig-in to marital life because it is part of their emotional investment and personal growth.
- (11) Men and women have different feelings about conflict. HE wants to win his way. SHE wants to win HER way or SHE wants to avoid conflict all together no matter how important it is. HE must understand that conflict takes time. SHE must understand that conflict takes courage. WINNING is not having your way, its having OUR way.

The undoing of gender is a monumental task — but exciting, because it enables you to embrace a partnership the way it was supposed to be experienced.