

"A kick in the solar plexus of conventional wisdom on how men and women think . . . The book is a lesson in critical thinking." —*Boston Globe*

SAME DIFFERENCE

HOW GENDER MYTHS
ARE HURTING OUR RELATIONSHIPS,
OUR CHILDREN, AND OUR JOBS



ROSALIND BARNETT
AND CARYL RIVERS

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY THE AUTHORS

Preface

In the time since the hardcover edition of this book was published, a series of high-profile events made clear that the issue of gender differences is far from a dry academic subject.

Harvard President Lawrence Summers made comments at an academic conference in 2005 that caused an international uproar. He said that perhaps it was women's innate deficiencies in math and science—not discrimination or the long hours of academic life—that accounted for the dearth of women in top positions in these fields. One world-renowned female scientist who was present, Nancy Hopkins of M.I.T., got up and walked out. The presidents of three elite universities wrote an op-ed in the *Boston Globe*, chastising the Harvard president. "Speculation that 'innate differences' may be a significant cause of underrepresentation by women in science and engineering may rejuvenate old myths and reinforce negative stereotypes and biases," wrote the authors, Susan Hockfield of M.I.T., a neuroscientist; Shirley M. Tilghman of Princeton, a molecular geneticist; and John L. Hennessy of Stanford, a computer scientist. (On the other side, his defenders accused his critics of political correctness and of being enemies of academic freedom.)

At the conference, Summers called for new research on gender differences in math and science, seeming to believe that little had been done in this area. Some ill-informed members of the media fell prey to the same mistake. The *Washington Post's* Sally Quinn wrote, "Why don't female mathematicians and scientists, particularly at Harvard, get together and research the issue until they have definitive answers instead of reaching for the smelling salts."

Despite Quinn's Victorian rhetoric, a phone call from president Summers to one of his faculty members could have saved him much grief.

Over the past two decades many large and well-designed studies had found again and again that the differences in math ability between men and women were trivial. (See our chapter “Do The Math” for a full discussion of these studies.)

Summers apologized for his error and proposed new initiatives for women in science. But what will people remember—the fact that good research debunked his statement (as he admitted) or the fact that the president of Harvard said women might not be naturally good at math?

It wasn't only in mathematics that debates over gender differences surfaced. In a fractious squabble over why there weren't more women writers on the op-ed pages of America's newspapers, some people suggested that women's brain structures were the problem. This issue erupted in controversy when law professor and Fox News commentator Susan Estrich offered her syndicated column to Michael Kinsley, editorial page editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. Things got nasty after the column was rejected and Estrich pointed out the paucity of op-eds written by women during Kinsley's tenure. (She suggested his judgment might have been affected by his Parkinson's disease and later apologized for that remark.) Critics used the incident to point out the glaring lack of women among media opinion makers: in a two-month study, they noted 19.9 percent of op-eds at the *Los Angeles Times* were by women. The *Washington Post* clocked in at 10.4 percent, and the *New York Times* at 16.9 percent.

Too often, with brain research, sweeping assertions are made on what one researcher calls “a thimbleful of evidence.” Research “findings” about the human brain appear and are debunked faster than hemlines go up and down.

A *Washington Post* article ventured the idea that women's brains made them too cautious to express strong opinions. “Women, being tuned in to the more cautious (and more creative) right brain,” said the *Post* story, “are more reluctant to do something unless they're sure they're going to get it right.”

Here's an alternate theory about why women don't write as many opinion pieces as men. New research finds that in social arenas that are

generally thought to be male-dominated, women are seen as either competent and unlikable, or not competent and likeable. In other words, a woman with strong opinions is far more likely to be disliked than a man. Other research shows that women suffer more negative consequences when they appear to fail than men do. No wonder women are more careful than men—the stakes are higher. The fracas over op-eds illustrates the ways in which generalizations about women's brains are being used to avoid the whole subject of discrimination. Switching the topic to brain structures or hormones usually means taking the focus away from the real reasons that women are often absent from the top levels in many fields. It is being said today that women can't achieve because they aren't risk takers, and their brains are wired for empathy, not achievement. Research demonstrates this is not so, but it's fast becoming the new backlash. (See our chapter “Leading Questions” about this issue.)

However, the media announced in 2005 that even if all these ideas about faulty brain structures and hormones are wrong, and women *do* have the ability and drive for leadership, there's a catch. If they do achieve, they will be miserable. No man will want them. Citing two studies that drew headlines like *Glass Ceilings at Altar as Well as Boardroom* and *Men Just Want Mommy*, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd asked in 2005 whether the feminist movement was “some sort of cruel hoax.” She wrote “The more women achieve, the less desirable they are.”

True? No. One study, by psychologists Stephanie Brown of the University of Michigan and Brian Lewis of UCLA, was seriously flawed. It was done on a small sample (120 male and 208 female undergraduates, mainly freshman.) The males rated the desirability of a fictitious female, who was described as either their immediate supervisor, a peer, or an assistant, as a dating or marriage partner. Surprise, surprise! The freshman males preferred the subordinate over the peer and the supervisor when it came to dating and mating. But was the study a barometer of adult male preferences—or of teenage boys' ambivalence about strong women? Clearly the latter, given the facts about what adult men

actually desire. Men do not reject achieving women—quite the opposite. Sociologist Valerie Oppenheimer of UC Berkeley reports that today men are choosing as mates women who have completed their education. The more education a woman has, the more marriageable she is. And Heather Boushey of the Center for Economic Policy Research found that women between the ages of 28 and 35 who work full time and earn more than \$55,000 per year, or have a graduate or professional degree, are just as likely to be successfully married as other working women.

The second study, cited by Dowd and picked up by the *Atlantic Monthly* under the headline “Too Smart to Marry?” found that for every 15-point increase in IQ score above the average, women’s likelihood of marriage fell by almost 60 percent.

Alarming news for bright women, right? Well, not exactly. The news stories about this study failed to mention that the women in the study are now in their eighties, having been born in 1921. In that era, smart women may have found the constraints of traditional marriage impossible, and since the “ideal” woman of the time was passive, timid, and not given to strong opinions, men may not have found smart women proper marriage candidates. But, despite the media hype, the study tells us nothing about the behavior of today’s young men and women.

Still, the “women haven’t got the right stuff” narrative is rapidly becoming the conventional wisdom. Unfortunately, women rarely hear the facts about their abilities and their natural inclinations—the drumbeat of bad news and scare stories creates too much of a din. If women believe that they can’t really achieve—or that they will suffer if they do—the bright potential of many lives will be forever dimmed.

However, there has been some good news lately. More stereotypes about sex differences are giving way to the insights of technologically sophisticated scientific study. In March 2005 a large international group of 282 scientists (molecular biologists, geneticists, and other specialists) at twenty-one institutions in six countries reported in *Nature* the results of extensive study of the genetic structure of the X chromosome. If a fetus has two X chromosomes it develops into a female; if it has one X

and one Y, it develops into a male. At a genetic level, the difference between the sexes boils down to the presence or absence of a second X or a Y chromosome!

The new findings that grabbed headlines across the globe showed that old thinking about the X chromosome had to be shelved. It had been thought that only the genes on *one* of the two X chromosomes every female carries were in fact active; the other was thought to be “turned off.” Now, it appears that about 15 percent of the genes on the second copy, the supposedly inactive chromosome, are still busily at work. And, about 10 percent of the genes on the “active” chromosome are in fact inactive. What does this mean? Simply, the combination of genes that are active or inactive on both copies of the X chromosome is very large, leading to far more differences among females than was thought before. In contrast, differences among men are far less dramatic, at least at the genetic level.

These findings contradict the idea that women are stamped out as if by cookie cutters, so that they talk, think, relate, communicate and lead in exactly the same way—as the media would have us believe.

What will tomorrow’s scientific breakthroughs reveal? Of course, no one knows. However, it does seem true that previously accepted generalizations about men and women are being dismantled at an astonishing rate. Overall, the most recent developments point to just the trends we describe in this book, namely that the differences among women and among men dwarf the differences between the sexes.

The Seduction of Difference

NEARLY TEN YEARS AGO we wrote a book called *She Works/He Works*.¹ Drawing on a four-year, million-dollar study of 300 working couples, we examined how the new “working” family—in which both parents were employed—was faring. Currently between 60 and 70 percent of families consist of two working parents and their children, and so it’s hard to remember that until recently, this was not the norm. Only thirty-odd years ago, most families consisted of one full-time working parent, the male, and one stay-at-home parent, the female. It was not until 1980, when the U.S. Census Bureau no longer automatically assumed the male to be the head of the household, that the nation put the old *Leave It to Beaver* family to rest.² Nowadays most women, including mothers of young children, are part of the paid labor force from their twenties until retirement. This revolution in women’s lives, and in the life of the family, is taken for granted today.

Our study, as well as studies done by others, showed that many fears arising from the entry of mothers into the workforce—regarding children’s psychological well-being, women’s ability to juggle multiple roles, and men’s willingness to accept those new roles—were groundless: people are doing well in the new family structure.³ Most children of working mothers don’t exhibit attachment problems or cognitive deficits. Many studies show no meaningful differences between the children of mothers at work and mothers at home.⁴ Most working mothers do not turn into emotional wrecks as they perform the family juggling act

(in fact, working mothers consistently exhibit fewer emotional problems than stay-at-home mothers), and most men seem to accept the changing power structure at work and on the home front. Clearly something about this new, busy lifestyle confers a major health benefit.

The good news we imparted in *She Works/He Works* was warmly welcomed; the book was widely read and reviewed, and in 1997 it was awarded the prestigious Books for a Better Life Award.

End of story? Not quite. One group of people in our study troubled us. They were having major problems in their marriages, experiencing severe stress at work and at home. What characterized this “out-of-synch” group was that their beliefs and attitudes deeply contradicted the lives they were living. Even though all the couples were actually performing dual roles, the people in this group didn’t believe men and women could—or should—be equally competent at both. In their minds, women were more effective in the home sphere because they were naturally more domestic and more nurturing and simply enjoyed that arena more. Men, they believed, were by nature more aggressive and less nurturing, and thus better suited to the competitive world of work than the “touchy-feely” domestic sphere. Because both the men and the women in this group believed they weren’t suited to both roles, they couldn’t enjoy their dual roles or feel competent performing them. The women were angry that they had to work when they felt their true job was making a home for their families. The men weren’t able to take pleasure in caring for their kids because they feared they lacked the natural instinct for it. As a result, the couples—especially the men—felt tremendous stress and often took it out on each other.

We were surprised to discover this group of unhappy couples within our larger study. As veterans of the 1970s women’s movement, we had helped broaden opportunities for women, and in the years since then we had witnessed a remarkable transformation in men’s and women’s attitudes and roles. When RB was getting her advanced degree in psychology in 1964, few women were principal investigators on major grants, held academic chairs, or were sought out as national experts on the science of human behavior. And when CR was studying journalism,

there were no female editors or managing editors of major newspapers, no female reporters on network television, few women on the “hard news” beats that led to top jobs. But by 1996, when we published our study of dual earners, all this had changed, as demonstrated by the overwhelmingly positive results of our research. Like us, most people had come to believe that men and women, if not interchangeable, were more alike than different in what they could and in fact did do. The prevailing wisdom was that both sexes would benefit and be happier when there was greater equality at work and at home.

So how to explain our out-of-synch couples? We sympathized with them but assumed that they were simply a holdover from an earlier era and that the traditional ideas they held—beliefs that caused them discord and distress—would soon be a thing of the past.

If we had been right, you would not be reading this book. Out-of-synch couples—faced with overwhelming evidence that women and men could take on the same tasks in the same way and do them equally well—would have faded into history. But, as it turns out, we were dead wrong.

Fast-forward eight years. A best-selling book is published in 2002 by a leading Harvard academic. In *The Blank Slate* psychologist Steven Pinker declares that men and women are *by nature* suited to different roles. Men are inherently “risk-taking achievers who can willingly endure discomfort in pursuit of success,” while “women are more likely to choose administrative support jobs that offer low pay in air conditioned offices.”

The Blank Slate was the latest in a barrage of backlash books that included Michael Gurian’s *The Wonder of Girls* (2002),⁵ which urged mothers to disregard feminist messages and focus on their daughters’ caring abilities rather than their talents, and Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* (2002), which warns women to abandon serious career plans and have children in their twenties.⁶ The acknowledged kingpin of the gender-difference screeds was John Gray’s huge best-seller *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus*, which told us that men and women virtually

evolved on different planets. Another genre of “difference” books came from a surprising source—women who declared themselves feminists but delivered a message that women are very different from men, which could easily be twisted to diminish women’s opportunities. These include Deborah Tannen’s best-selling *You Just Don’t Understand*, a testament to men’s and women’s inherently distinct styles of communicating, and Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, which has profoundly influenced several generations of women’s studies students with its message about women’s unique caring ability.

The list goes on and on and on. Incredibly, traditional ideas that we thought would soon vanish were back in full force. In the past few years, ideas of innate and rigid gender differences that were hurting some of the families we studied have reemerged, this time from new and unexpected places, dominating best-seller lists and becoming part of the academic canon. Most significantly, they were affecting hiring and promotions in corporations, influencing major legal decisions, and changing educational curricula. In a subtler and perhaps more insidious fashion, these ideas were also influencing the thoughts and feelings of men and women as they made individual decisions about work, child care, and the division of labor in the home.

When we saw how these gender-difference ideas were infiltrating institutions and families, we were puzzled. Why would people, including some of our brightest intellectuals, promote ideas that we thought had been nullified by mothers’ advancement into the workforce and fathers’ growing involvement in family life. (Women today provide the economic support for most American children.) Our initial confusion soon turned to alarm on two counts: First, all our research and the research of our colleagues contradicted the notion of essential difference. And second, these ideas were not helping the millions of men and women managing multiple roles at home and in the workforce. As with the out-of-sync group in our 1996 study, we were seeing more and more people becoming anxious because their lives were in conflict with traditional sex-role beliefs—newly cloaked in the mantle of “gender-difference” speak. We were seeing these couples in RB’s psychotherapy practice,

among our friends and their children, in parenting and women’s magazines, on television shows, and in an endless stream of new books.

A Closer Look

So, like all good researchers, we went back to the data. We looked closely at the “gender-difference” theories to assess their assumptions and the source of their information. We reexamined our own studies and those of our colleagues to learn why our findings stood in such opposition to the conclusions of the gender-difference theorists. This book is the fruit of that analysis. In each chapter, we examine some of the leading theories in a thorough, systematic way. Eight years of research and writing went into this book, which surveys the latest findings (roughly 1,500 studies) of eminent scientists in biology, primatology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, genetics, and managerial behavior. We rarely rely on a single study. We depend mostly on meta-analyses (which combine the results of many studies), individual studies with well-designed procedures and random samples, and studies with representative samples of the population. These allow us to have confidence in our conclusions. A poorly designed single study may stimulate sensational headlines, but the findings may not hold up when other scientists reexamine the issue. We’re confident that the science on which our conclusions are based is sound.

In this book we go beyond data analysis, however, to propose a new way to put together the jigsaw puzzle of research. We hope that our findings, based on a wide array of studies from many varied disciplines, will be of practical use to our readers as they structure their lives.

First, it’s important to understand a fundamental difference between our assumptions and those of the gender-difference theorists. We begin with the premise—which we support throughout the book—that people’s behavior today is determined more by situation than by gender. In the past, gender was all-important. Whether you were male or female determined your role in society: the way you behaved and the work you

did. Under these circumstances, it's easy to assume that the reason men and women were doing different kinds of work was biological. If you look around a community and see only women weaving and only men tilling the soil, you are apt to conclude that the "cause" of this difference is that women are suited for weaving and men for tilling. But that conclusion would be wrong. Being female doesn't automatically give you a talent for weaving. Rigid cultural norms, not biology, are operating here. As gender roles loosen—as they have done in the developed world—women's and men's behavior reflects many forces: their gender, their individual talents and preferences, their personalities, and the situations in which they find themselves.

In our modern technological society, both sexes are doing many of the same things and—lo and behold!—are performing equally well. It's most likely the job that dictates the behavior, not the gender. Consequently we argue that one sex is not inherently better suited to certain roles than the other sex. Certain men and women may have personalities and talents that make them more suitable for a specific role, but personality and talent are individual, not gender based. Some critics point out that there are clear biological differences between the sexes, and obviously that's true, but we don't believe those differences determine most of our behavior or limit the roles we can assume. Because the woman gives birth does not mean that she will necessarily nurture the child better than the father does. Nor does it mean that she will nurture the child differently. (Some might find this difficult to believe, but we will demonstrate its truth in Chapters 6 and 9.) By the same token, men on average may have more testosterone than women, but that does not mean, as some experts have argued, that men are more competitive than women, more suited to be police officers, airline pilots, and CEOs. *Same Difference* acknowledges the existence of gender differences but argues that the part they play in our lives is far less important than most people have assumed.

In contrast to our position, most gender-difference theorists assume that there are fundamental differences between the sexes and that gender absolutely determines behavior; as Freud famously said, anatomy is

destiny.⁷ According to these theorists, differences between the sexes will determine, for example, which jobs men and women prefer, how they perform on the job, and how they feel about the job. As we've noted, some theorists also maintain that the sexes are inherently better suited to some jobs than others. Women are better nurturers of children, for example, according to Carol Gilligan and Michael Gurian. Steven Pinker and the columnist and erstwhile presidential candidate Pat Buchanan argue that men are better suited to highly competitive arenas, such as certain sales jobs, because they are inherently more aggressive.⁸ Some gender-difference researchers believe that men's and women's brains operate differently. For instance, as we'll see in Chapter 7, some theorists maintain that men's (but not women's) brains are hardwired for math, making men better suited to any job requiring math skills. Others argue that men and women look at each other in very different ways, speak to each other differently, reason differently, have different moral precepts, and generally inhabit different worlds (or different planets, in John Gray's parlance). Most of these writers maintain that such differences are innate or are evolutionarily determined and thus not subject to change.

You may wonder why we pay so much attention to what are, basically, philosophical differences among those who theorize about gender difference. We do so because, as we'll show throughout the book, theoretical assumptions have real, practical consequences for the lives and health of men, women, and children. If you believe, for example, that women are better nurturers than men, can you really ask a man to take over child-rearing tasks, knowing he'll do them in an "inferior" way? If you're sure that men are uniquely hardwired for math, won't you discourage women from going into fields that require math—fields that promise to be some of the highest paying in the future? If you're a teacher and you think boys are better at math than girls, does that lower your expectations of the girls? Do you go easier on them? And if you believe that boys don't have the innate verbal skills to write well, do you set the bar lower for them? If you are convinced that men are more competitive and aggressive than women, why would you place women

in sales and marketing jobs where a strong competitive streak is an advantage? Perhaps positions in human resources, which generally pay less and require “relational” skills, are the better choice for women. If you’re having a problem in your marriage, do you assume that men and women are perfectly capable of understanding each other and, with a little work, can resolve communication snafus? Or do you assume that the sexes are simply fated to speak very differently, making communication problems nearly impossible to solve? These are just a few of the ways in which theoretical assumptions can color our thinking and decisionmaking. Throughout the book, we will bring in many more examples to illustrate this point.

Drawing on a range of sources, we will show how these theories hurt male–female relationships, undermine equality in schools and the workplace, adversely affect the division of labor in the home, and deprive our children of the opportunity to develop their full human potential. Throughout the book we will also step back, at times, and consider why some of these theories emerged when they did and why they remain so seductive. Surely it was no coincidence that just as women successfully moved into the workforce in enormous numbers and challenged traditional male–female stereotypes, theories emerged that defined men and women on the basis of those very stereotypes. It is not lost on us that these rigid gender stereotypes have emerged with particular force as women have been gaining real power. (Similarly, *The Bell Curve*—which argued that maybe blacks *weren’t* really as intelligent as whites—didn’t appear until African Americans began to make inroads into the monolith of white society.)

This timing would be easier to understand if the theories came out of a conservative base whose goal was to turn the clock back. But at least some of these ideas were advanced by women who defined themselves as feminists and worked to advance the cause of women, not undermine it. Although there is no simple reason why these ideas emerged when they did, part of the explanation may lie in “second wave feminism.” (The first wave was the suffrage movement of the early 1900s.) It’s important to remember that before women began their large-scale

migration into the workforce in the 1970s, certain deeply held beliefs about women’s nature and capabilities stood in their way. *Anatomy is destiny* was at its height. It was thought, for example, that women had no need to succeed in the workplace because they bore children, that only “mannish” women had ambition, that any man whose wife worked was “henpecked,” that suburban mothers who always put the needs of their husbands and children first were sublimely happy, that women shouldn’t “bother their pretty little heads” with issues of the world beyond the home. Even women’s menstrual cycles rendered them unfit for leadership. In the 1970s, a prominent physician, Dr. Edgar Berman, told a Democratic Party task force that women’s leadership capabilities were limited by their hormones. When Hawaii Congresswoman Patsy Mink protested, Berman labeled her a woman acting under “the raging hormonal imbalance of the periodic lunar cycle.”⁹

Attempting to overcome those stereotypes, some women of the second wave asserted that they were not only the equal of men, but carbon copies of them. Women were told to learn the “games your mothers never taught you,” to march to work in big-shouldered suits and tailored bow ties, to stop referring to each other as “girls,” and, for heaven’s sake, never let “them” see you cry. Any hint of femininity in dress, language, or behavior risked censure. When you appear as the first (and sometimes the only) woman in an all-male world, your goal is to blend in and resemble the men as much as possible. A frilly blouse screamed that you were not to be taken seriously. At the Harvard Business school, RB wore her long hair in a bun and dressed exclusively in tailored suits or dresses. CR wore jeans and boots to political meetings—and cheated with discreet eyeliner. In this period, the traditional female virtues were put under wraps, or under power suits in this case.

Although mimicking men helped women move into the workplace and find acceptance there, it also sent an unintended message to women: The traditional male role was what they should strive for, and the traditional female role should be left at home. Can anyone forget Hillary Clinton’s stray remark that set off a firestorm? In her husband’s first presidential campaign, when the soon-to-be first lady commented

that she could have stayed at home baking cookies instead of being out in the workforce, many American women rose up to admonish her. Was she dismissing those mothers who stayed home to bake cookies? Was she suggesting that she was a better, more important person because she was a power broker in the outside world? The response to her remark revealed the enormous tensions and conflicts that women felt as they wrestled with two seemingly conflicting identities.

The bottom line is that women like baking cookies—a metaphor for women's traditional skills. Women value the role of nurturer, and during those early days worried that they either would be forced to jettison that role when they moved into the workforce or, if they stayed at home, would be dismissed as submissive Stepford wives. As we'll see in the next chapter, Carol Gilligan's theories allowed women to legitimately reclaim the nurturer role by arguing that this identity did not make women inferior to men, but simply different—and maybe even better—than the opposite sex.

Although Carol Gilligan intended to raise the status of women, she unintentionally set a trap for both sexes—by giving birth to a school of thought claiming that a woman's nurturing or “relational” self is an essential part of her nature. It is not a role that she can put on or take off at will, but rather one that she—and not the male—is destined to fulfill. This school of thought, which came to be known as “essential feminism,” regarded all differences between the sexes as the reflection of “innate” characteristics. It ignored not only the crucial issue of situation as a shaper of behavior but also the huge differences among women. Missing too was the importance of another key factor—power or the lack of it.

Power Trips

Once upon a time, researchers looked at the workplace, lumped all female employees into one group and all male employees into another, and compared them. Because few women held prestigious jobs, the studies wound up comparing apples and oranges: bosses and secretaries.

Not surprisingly, researchers found one group assertive, ambitious, and focused on moving up; the other passive, less interested in promotion, and more interested in making friends and gossiping than climbing the ladder. They said one group revealed typical “male” traits, while the other showed typical “female” traits. But guess what? The real issue was power and powerlessness, not sex—and that reality got ignored. It wasn't that male employees were assertive and focused because they were male. Rather, it was because they were in powerful positions. Put each sex in the other's role, and you see a dramatic shift in behavior. And give each the same work, with the same power and prestige and the same expectations for success, and you find that men and women start to behave in ways that are increasingly similar. Situation outweighs sex. Too often, we've mistaken power behavior for gender behavior.

When it comes to power, situation, and behavior, *Same Difference* offers not only reliable science but also commonsense wisdom that most of us already possess. When we look around, we see clearly that all men are not alike and all women are not alike. One woman is a fearless leader, another is a laid-back, caring friend. One man is a tough boss with a tin ear for employees' needs. Another is a quiet listener with great reserves of patience. And women and men shift their behavior all the time. The CEO who was barking orders at the office might well be a nurturing, “relational” father and husband the minute he gets home. Or he may be pushed around big time by his wife, his daughter, his mother, and even his sister (think Tony Soprano). The deferential secretary may manage the girls basketball team after work—as aggressively and ambitiously as any NBA coach.

Time for a Truce

In explaining behavior, gender-difference experts usually dredge up the “nature versus nurture” argument. For a time, those who espoused the nurture argument—that most gender differences are socially constructed—held sway. Environment trumps nature. Now the nature

camp, with its many high-profile adherents, is monopolizing the airwaves. These experts claim massive differences between the sexes that are deeply rooted in our evolutionary history and are relatively immune from the forces of nurture. Nature trumps nurture.

It's time to call a truce in this war. It's not nature versus nurture. It's both. We are not "blank slates" on which experience writes the text. Nor are we so hardwired that we act out inevitable lifelong scripts. We are all a product of many interacting forces, including our genes, our personalities, our environment, and chance. At conception, we are each endowed with our genetic heritage. What happens thereafter—in the uterus, in the early years, and in the rest of our lives—depends heavily on factors other than our genetic heritage. As children begin to explore the world, everything they see and touch stimulates neural activity, which in turn transforms the brain, which in turn changes the way they see and interact with the world.

In short, we are an ever-changing product of continuous learning and interaction that builds on our genetic heritage. But those who endorse the nature-is-all position tend to ignore the immense variety among men and women, boys and girls. Sociologist Michael Kimmel writes of his four-year-old son Zachary, who loves to wrestle and play with his superhero toys Buzz Lightyear and Batman.¹⁰ Zack recently added Barbie to his collection and "she became another superhero, happily flying around with Spiderman and the gang." But, Zachary's father writes, "he also seems remarkably attuned to others' feelings, compassionate and caring. When a child in his preschool is crying, Zachary will offer a hug, comfort, or ask what's wrong." Kimmel worries, with good reason, that the demands of boyhood "which have nothing whatever to do with evolutionary imperatives or brain chemistry, cripple boys, forcing them to renounce those feelings and suppress and deny the instinct to care. And those who deviate will be savagely punished." He also worries about Zachary's little girl playmates who "love to run with him in their playgrounds, who can out-swing him on the monkey bars, who are fearless adventurers in their play."

We worry about what will happen to Zachary and his female classmates when the difference juggernaut comes their way. Such views po-

larize the sexes: Men are aggressive; women caring. Men are rational; women emotional. But in truth we exhibit all of these behaviors at one time or another. Men and women both experience aggression, but given social sanctions, they differ in how often and how directly they permit themselves to express it. Aggression is not the property of one sex or the other.

Of course there are differences between the sexes—how could it be otherwise? But more important is the size of the differences *between* men and women compared to those *among* women and *among* men. In most areas of life, the latter are much larger. If you are a woman named Sarah, you may be very different from Jessica, Elizabeth, or Susan in the way you tackle a math problem, deal with subordinates, relate to your spouse, soothe your child, feel about yourself. In fact, you are just as apt to be like Richard, Tom, and Seth in these areas as you are to be like other women.

Looking Ahead

Arguments over gender difference aren't merely academic exercises; they have real consequences. If we believe that men and women are inevitably and innately different, we won't regard policies that limit women at work as discrimination, but rather as the logical outcome of women's "choice" not to seek good jobs. We won't expand parental leave for fathers (as much as they may want it) because men are not "natural" caregivers. We'll try to resegregate the military and the workplace, and we'll abandon efforts to spend more money on women's sports because women are "naturally" less interested in sports than men are. We'll set up separate educational facilities for boys and girls, and teach all girls one way and all boys another, so lots of kids won't get the kind of teaching that's right for them. We'll create suspicion rather than trust between men and women by teaching men to view women as being interested only in men's paychecks and women to believe that men are biologically programmed to have sex and run off.

Our goal in this book is to look beyond junk science, pop psychology, and media spin to see what is real and what is not. We want to tell a new story for a new century, one that will empower both men and women to make good choices and take advantage of the opportunities that await them. For a long and complicated life, women will need skills beyond those of bearing and caring for children. In a life that will increasingly depend on relating to others at home and at work, men will need much more than aggression and fertility. As people live longer and want to thrive, not merely survive, both sexes must be allowed to draw on, as Michael Kimmel puts it, “a full—and fully human—emotional palette.”

To this end, we will paint a richer portrait of the sexes, one based on research, that will enable women and men to take maximum advantage of the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead and to confront the future unencumbered by the myths and stereotypes of the past.

part one

Relationships

The Caring Trap

MIRIAM, A SUCCESSFUL executive at a major retail firm, married Don, the wealthy owner of a car dealership, and followed him from Boston to Washington, D.C. A cheerful, outgoing woman with a wide network of friends, Miriam was one of five children and grew up in a happy family. She had always wanted a large brood of children and imagined herself as an energetic, creative mother, the kind who would invent games and sew costumes for her kids and take them on adventures to parks and museums.

But when Miriam had two boys in less than two years, she found herself overwhelmed. "I'm always tired, I'm edgy—I'm not the person I want to be with the boys," she laments. After much soul searching, she decided to put the children in day care two days a week. It seemed like a reasonable, affordable plan for an overburdened mother, but Miriam was wracked by guilt: "I don't believe I can't manage this. My mother had five kids and never had outside help. What's wrong with me? I'm supposed to be able to do this."

Miriam sees herself as an imperfect woman, deficient in the special caring abilities that women are supposed to come by naturally. Even though she feels less exhausted with the children in day care, she feels ambivalent about needing it. She believes that every moment she spends with her sons has to be memorable and special. Instead, she finds herself sprawled across the bed watching *Sponge Bob Squarepants* with the boys and drowning in self-loathing.

Janelle is a magazine writer in her early forties. Frank, her husband, is the major breadwinner, but he's a demanding, self-centered man with a sense of entitlement. Over the years of their marriage, Janelle has assumed the role of understanding Frank, and she tries to accommodate even his most outrageous demands. Since they have no children, Frank expects to be the center of her attention. "He's more work than a whole bunch of kids," she complains. Frank's position as a university professor gives him a flexibility that Janelle's monthly deadlines don't permit. But Frank, who loves to travel, is always booking trips for them without consulting her. Once he presented her with airline tickets to London two days before she had a major project due.

Janelle feels she can't say no or even tell him that he has to cut down on his ambitious plans if he wants her to join him. "Look, I know these trips are really important to him—but they make it very hard for me to plan my work," she explains. Unable to assert herself, she is often depressed and angry. "He never hears me when I say I have to meet my deadlines. It's like I'm talking to the wall. One time I said to him, 'Frank, October is going to be a killer for me!' but he went ahead and made hotel reservations in Montreal over Columbus Day. I convinced him to cancel, but we had a huge fight over it." Now that Janelle is in therapy, she's beginning to understand that this pattern will go on forever if she doesn't break it. But it's hard for her to let go of the notion that she has to meet his needs—because "taking care of people" is what women do.

Miriam and Janelle are caught in a "caring trap." It's their job, they believe, to take superb care of the other people in their lives. Consequently Janelle can't tell Frank he needs to plan his life around her schedule once in a while, and Miriam can't wean herself away from the ideal of the perfect, omnipresent mother. They are both in a trap from which, it seems, they can't escape.

It's not a trap of their own making, though. Miriam and Janelle, like millions of other women, have been powerfully influenced by a tradition with deep roots in history. The idea of women as sole and "natural" caregivers goes all the way back to Genesis, in which Eve was created to take care of Adam. ("It is not good for man to be alone.")¹

Throughout history, the "good woman" was the one who sacrificed for others. In the *Odyssey*, while Ulysses wandered around having adventures, faithful wife Penelope stayed home, raised his children, and kept his kingdom in good order.² Almost never, in the Bible, other sacred texts, or world literature, is the woman ambitious for herself without suffering some terrible fate. In fairy tales, notes the late feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun, aggressive, self-motivated women are usually cast as wicked stepmothers or witches.³

When the founding fathers proclaimed the Declaration of Independence, it was understood that only men had an inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness. A century later, Theodore Roosevelt compared women who were not loving wives and mothers to cowardly draft dodgers, declaring, "The woman who, whether from cowardice, from selfishness, from having a false and vacuous ideal, shirks her duty as wife and mother, earns the right to our contempt, just as the man who, from any motive, fears to do his duty when the country calls him."⁴

Women who tried to change society for their own benefit often had to do so in the name of others. Advocates of women's suffrage argued that women ought to have the vote precisely because they care for others. Suffragist Julia Ward Howe insisted, "Woman is the mother of the race, the guardian of its helpless infancy . . . upon her devolve the details which bless and beautify family life."⁵ In the Victorian era, the "Cult of True Womanhood" portrayed women as fragile angels of the hearth, too delicate for the perils of the world beyond the home.⁶ Ironically, motherhood was decreed to be woman's sublime gift—at a time when wealthy women were hiring more and more servants to deal with the daily care of children. The 1950s sanctified suburban mom—an outgrowth of the effort to get women out of the jobs they held during World War II and didn't want to leave.⁷ Starting in the 1970s, the women's movement began to transform the American landscape.⁸ In one of the greatest mass movements of American history, women flooded into the workplace, and attention focused less on woman's ability to care, and more on her ability to achieve.

And then along came Harvard's Carol Gilligan.

Gilligan (now at New York University) presented a new narrative for women's lives, which says that women have a unique, caring nature that men do not share. Her ideas have revolutionized the psychology of women and influenced their life choices to an unprecedented degree. Beginning in 1982 with *In a Different Voice*, her books have sold over half a million copies in the United States.⁹ Why do women respond so strongly to the idea that they alone can hear the imperative to care for others? Carol Gilligan's books didn't become best-sellers because they were saying something new or different to women. To understand Gilligan's appeal, you have to look not only at history but at the complex details of her argument.

The Gilligan Juggernaut

Before Gilligan, every major theory of how human beings grow and thrive took males as the norm; these theories influenced parenting, education, and careers. Sigmund Freud, for example, focused heavily on the father's role in children's early development.¹⁰ Central to his ideas was the Oedipal crisis in the lives of young boys, who have to surrender their primary attachment to their mother and develop a "superego" that will propel them through life. A male child who makes a successful passage through this crisis has a healthy sense of himself as a whole, competent person able to assume his role in the world of work and form a loving relationship with a woman. In contrast to the clarity with which Freud described boys' progress, his treatment of girls was less precise. The girl's major milestone is her discovery that she doesn't have a penis, and the only way she can make up for this deficiency is to marry and have a child. Girls can never develop a sense of autonomy before that; alone they are incomplete.

Freud's follower Erik Erikson laid out a sequence through which children move on their way to maturity. He too believed that until a young woman marries, her sense of identity is incomplete.¹¹ According to Freud, women can never be as self-directed, rational, or driven to

succeed as men in the world outside the home. For Erikson, since adolescent girls can't achieve a full sense of identity until they marry, girls must be indecisive and their plans open-ended, pending the arrival of the man of their dreams. All future plans are tinged with a sense of uncertainty for women. Not so for men. For them, sense of identity formed in adolescence *precedes* the formation of intimate relationships, allowing them to plan their careers without this sense of tentativeness.

But for a woman, if you accept the idea that only a man completes you, you feel impermanent. You can't plan your future because you have none without "him." A divorced middle-aged woman (quoted by Carol Gilligan) says:

As a woman, I feel I never understood that I was a person, that I can make decisions and I have a right to make decisions. I always felt that I belonged to my father or my husband in some way. I still let things happen to me rather than make them happen. I think that if you don't grow up feeling that you ever had any choices, you don't either have the sense that you have emotional responsibility.¹²

Carol Gilligan broke ranks with her male predecessors on the idea of female inferiority. In male theories, she said, "the qualities necessary for adulthood—the capacity for autonomous thinking, clear decision making and responsible action are those associated with masculinity, but considered undesirable as attributes of the feminine self."¹³ She proposed a new theory of human development based on the experiences of women and articulated the idea that women have a "relational self," which sees reality in terms of connections with other people. Moreover, this relational self is innate only to women. Because boys are typically reared by the opposite-sex parent, whom they must repudiate in order to grow up as men, they do not sustain the awareness of—or connection with—other people that women develop naturally.

In this view, the sexes look at the world through different lenses. If you could put on the "male" lens like a pair of sunglasses, you'd see a landscape on which individual objects stand in isolation, distinct and

unconnected. But when you put on the “female” glasses, new items appear. No longer are the objects in your field of vision isolated; now they are tethered together by brightly colored lines and moorings that previously lay hidden.

Imagine a meeting between a senior male executive and a group of midlevel managers of both sexes. In Gilligan’s scenario, the male executive would see a room full of individuals, whom he would judge on their distinct performances. He’d decide to give Allen, the marketing manager, a prime assignment because he knows him to be an efficient worker. The female senior executive, in contrast, would be acutely aware of how each manager relates to the others and how they work together—just as she is aware of how her coworkers, her friends, and her teenage children relate to one another. She might decide that although Allen was indeed competent, his hair-trigger temper too often ruffled team dynamics, so she’d give the assignment to a manager who could be counted on to keep people working together well.

Such connections, Gilligan argues, shape the development of women’s entire web of thought—and the way they make decisions. Women build their lives around their connections to other people and judge themselves on the quality of those relationships. If women are completely enmeshed in their connections to others, it follows that their moral decisions, their ideas about right and wrong, and the ways in which they confront life’s moral choices will be colored by these experiences. Men, unable to see such connections, operate as if the individual is paramount. They make their decisions based on rules and abstract principles.

Seeing women as “different” was hardly a new idea, but this time it was coming not from men who believed that women’s brains were tiny and their bodies frail, but from a woman who saw value—and even moral superiority—where men had seen weakness and inferiority. According to Carol Gilligan, women’s moral judgment proceeds from “an initial concern with survival, to a focus on goodness” and finally to a principled understanding of connection as the moral basis on which to act. The implications of this claim are enormous. Indeed, if women are the better sex, then the entire weight of the goodness of society rests

firmly on their shoulders. This not only takes men off the hook but puts an impossible burden on women.

Gilligan’s ideas penetrated public practice and private belief with unprecedented swiftness. Her ascension was akin to Dr. Benjamin Spock’s, whose ideas of more liberal, “permissive” parenting swept away a previous generation’s belief in strict discipline and rigid child-rearing practices.¹⁴ Let’s examine how one psychologist’s leanings brought about such widespread change, and how her theory was turned on its head to once again relegate women to domestic, caring roles.

Gilligan’s Message

Early in her career as a psychologist, Carol Gilligan became deeply unsatisfied with the scholarly work on how people develop a moral sense. She was particularly skeptical of the research of one of her mentors at Harvard, Lawrence Kohlberg, who had developed scales to measure the ways in which people make moral decisions.¹⁵ At the low end of his scale were people who simply followed such moral authorities as religious leaders, politicians, or social arbiters. At the high end were people who had internalized a set of moral principles and acted on those principles in situations where moral decisions were required.

Kohlberg used the now classic “Heinz dilemma” to measure moral decisionmaking. In this scenario, Heinz’s wife is severely ill and may die without her expensive medicine, which he can’t afford. Should he break into the store to steal the medicine to keep his wife alive? Kohlberg believed that Heinz may indeed break into the store because justice places the right to life above the right to property. He was less concerned with what people decided than with how they reached their decision. He used their decisionmaking process to rank people on his scale.

Gilligan claimed that women scored lower than men—meaning that their moral development was less mature. But was it really? Gilligan asked. Were women at fault, or were Kohlberg’s methods in some way lacking? “This repeated finding of developmental inferiority in women may . . . have more to do with that standard by which development has

been measured than with the quality of women's thinking per se," Gilligan said.¹⁶ She claimed that when women are judged by masculine standards, they are seen as undeveloped, more like children than adults. She proposed an alternate theory. Women, she said, based their decisions not on the abstract ideas of justice that Kohlberg relied on for his ranking but on beliefs about human connection and caring.

To support her argument, Gilligan cited two of her own studies. In one, she asked twenty-five of her Harvard students to respond to the Heinz dilemma. In the other, she and a team of researchers questioned twenty-five women grappling with moral issues as they contemplated whether to end their unwanted pregnancies. Gilligan analyzed the women's language and claimed to find clear evidence that the women in the studies used what she calls "care reasoning" instead of the "justice reasoning" Kohlberg admired. In the Heinz study, she says that women voiced "an injunction to care" while the men reported "an injunction to respect the rights of others . . . and to uphold the right to life and self-fulfillment." Gilligan claims that for women "the moral person is one who helps others; goodness is service, meeting one's obligations to others, if possible, without sacrificing oneself." Gilligan believes that women's moral decisionmaking proceeds in three stages. First is a focus on the self, second is the concept of responsibility as the basis of a new "equilibrium" between the self and others, and third is a stage in which condemnation of hurt or violence to others becomes the guiding principle of action.¹⁷

In Gilligan's abortion study, a married twenty-four-year-old Catholic woman found herself pregnant two months after the birth of her first child. She decided to terminate the pregnancy, because, she said, she was thinking of her husband and his financial and emotional needs, and of her aging parents, with whom they were living, as well as her own reluctance to handle another pregnancy so soon. She thought the fetus was indeed a life, though an unformed one. "Am I doing the right thing? Is it moral?" she asked. In the end, she decided to have the abortion, not because she wanted it but because she thought that having the child would be too great a burden on others. She came to this decision

via her own sense of what she owed to others, not because she was being pressured by her husband or family. "I can't be so morally strict as to hurt three other people because of my moral beliefs," she said. Gilligan sees her as striving to "encompass the needs of both self and others, to be responsible to others and thus to be 'good' but also to be responsible to herself and thus to be 'honest' and 'real.'"¹⁸

Based on these two studies, Gilligan, as already noted, makes a sweeping claim: male and female moral development takes different paths, due primarily to what happens to them in early childhood. Boys are urged to separate from their mothers. Girls, in contrast, are held close by their mothers, making the connection between self and other the hallmark of female socialization. For boys, concern with individual rights and justice dominates their moral development: "justice reasoning." For girls, relationships and issues of care and responsibility for others are at the core of morality: "care reasoning." "Thus," Gilligan says, "males tend to have difficulty with relationships, while females tend to have problems with individuation."

Gilligan's Critics

Despite the runaway success of Gilligan's ideas (*In a Different Voice* has been translated into fourteen languages), there was rampant skepticism from the beginning among her fellow psychologists. A number of other researchers read her students' responses and found them complex and hard to fit into neat categories; no clear gender voice emerged to them. Furthermore, a review of Kohlberg's data found that women did not fare as poorly as Gilligan suggests. Psychologist Lawrence J. Walker concluded that if "educational and occupational backgrounds of subjects are controlled, there are no sex differences in moral judgment."¹⁹ In other words, when you look at the education people have and the jobs they do, you discover that those two factors—not their sex—account for the differences that had been erroneously attributed to sex.

Critics also questioned Gilligan's research methods. Her abortion study consisted of only twenty-five women (an additional two miscarried

and another two had unknown outcomes), and Gilligan herself notes that the women varied widely in age (from fifteen to thirty-three years) and race, as well as socioeconomic and marital status. From such a small sample, it would be impossible to draw any conclusions; at best, hypotheses could be generated to test in a better sample. (Gilligan admits that her theory of men and women “awaits for its confirmation on a more systematic comparison of the responses of both sexes.”)²⁰

Gilligan simply observed her subjects’ decisionmaking processes. When they seemed to use “care” reasoning, she assumed it was because they were women. But might it have been due to their race, socioeconomic class, level of education—or some other factor? She had no way of knowing.

Most glaringly, Gilligan’s sample included no men. Would the husband of the twenty-four-year-old Catholic woman have made an argument similar to his wife’s? Would he have said that the needs of his newborn son and his wife (advised by doctors that the new pregnancy could endanger her health) were paramount in his decision about an abortion? We have no way of knowing.

Moreover, Gilligan reported only some of her data and conducted the interviews herself or with her associates. (Usually scientists hire interviewers who are “blind” to the ideas being tested.) She provided no statistics or coding scheme to allow independent researchers to assess the criteria she used or replicate her work. Consequently one of the critical tests of good research—the ability of its findings to be replicated by other scientists—was not passed. Only now, more than two decades after her work was first published, is she giving researchers access to some of her data.

Psychologist Faye Crosby gave the same tests to her undergraduates and found no consistent pattern among their answers.²¹ She also designed a series of questions in 1991 to investigate women’s “relational” qualities. She asked both male and female undergraduates the following questions: Is your self-concept wrapped up in social interactions? Do you need and enjoy the company of others? Do you learn in social situations better than in impersonal or mechanical situations? Are you swayed in your opinions and attitudes by others?

Crosby found that females’ self-concept depends on social approval—but so does males’. Males enjoy being in the company of others—just as much as females do. Social factors such as approval by teachers or supervisors are important for women—and just as important for men. And women are not easier to persuade than men. “Under some circumstances, everyone acts like a spineless jellyfish; and under other circumstances, everyone shows strength and independence.”²²

Crosby methodically examined all the scientifically well-designed studies comparing males and females with regard to empathy, altruism, cooperativeness, nurturance, and intimacy and found “no conclusive evidence to show that men and women differ from one another in the extent to which they attend to and are good at interpersonal relationships.”²³ It’s clear, says Crosby, that many factors affect how you relate to other people—your social class, age, religion, nationality, education, personality, and especially the situation you’re in at the moment. Your sex is only one variable, and not necessarily the most important one. Situation, not sex, is often more important. This is a key concept to which we will return.

Ann Colby and William Damon²⁴ at Stanford and Debra Nails²⁵ at Michigan State also took issue with Gilligan. If women and men are as different as she purported, they argued, then we’d have to rethink everything we know about human behavior. Gilligan, said Colby and Damon, represented “no less than a sweeping critique of all major developmental theories on the grounds that they are biased against women . . . if Gilligan’s charges are justified, developmental psychology must return to the drawing board, since it has misrepresented a majority of the human race.”

Other voices began to weigh in as well, including Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor. In 1986 Suzanna Sherry, a professor at the University of Minnesota law school, analyzed the language of O’Connor’s decisions and identified her as a voice of this new feminism.²⁶ Sherry concluded that women’s jurisprudence would be “merciful, just and compassionate.” Justice O’Connor was not pleased. She debunked Sherry’s idea that men and women adjudicate cases differently. (She proved to be

right. A major study published in the *Indiana Law Review* found that “most female judges do not decide cases in a distinctly feminine or feminist manner.”²⁷

In a speech at NYU in 1991, O'Connor said, “This ‘New Feminism’ is interesting but troubling, precisely because it so nearly echoes the Victorian myth of the ‘True Woman’ that kept women out of law for so long . . . asking whether women attorneys speak with a ‘different voice’ than men do is a question that is both dangerous and unanswerable.”²⁸

Dangerous indeed. And prophetic. O'Connor correctly intuited that such a notion would ultimately hurt women. Not, as in the past, because their “difference” would be used as an excuse to close doors of opportunity, but because women would be held to an impossible new standard. The following examples reflect today's and maybe tomorrow's headlines:

1. If you're an executive, your company may send you to a mandatory retraining program because you're seen as too assertive, not “relational” enough. This happened to a group of female managers in California who, to their chagrin, were marched off to a Bully Broads seminar in 2001. “I was sent here,” one of the women said, “because of my intolerance for incompetence and for having a passion for my job that scared people to death.”²⁹
2. New research finds that a kinder, gentler image of managers brings with it hidden costs to women. Suzanne Edmonds, a sales representative for a large pharmaceutical company, was promoted to regional manager—but her promotion hinged on a performance review. Even though her technical competence was rated very high, she got a lower grade on “interpersonal skills” and lost the promotion. She was a victim, say Laurie Rudman of Rutgers and Peter Glick of Lawrence University, of a “trend toward the ‘feminization’ of middle management,” as corporations recognize the value of more collegial leadership styles.³⁰ The researchers found that the new trend actually winds up discriminating against talented women. To get hired, both men and women have to ap-

- pear competent, decisive, and in command. Men don't get punished for such traits after they get the job, but women do. Simply by being in charge, say the researchers, “women may be seen as violating the feminine-niceness prescription of society.”³¹ Like the “bully broads,” they are punished. Of course, if women are seen as too nice and too feminine, they don't get hired for top jobs in the first place.
3. If your daughter is a math whiz in middle school and wants to do an independent project on the new Mars expedition, her teacher may insist that she work on the project with a team because “that's the way girls learn.” When your daughter objects, you get a note from the teacher saying that she is being “uncooperative” and hurting the feelings of the other girls. The teacher reads to you from a story in the *Boston Globe*, in which a psychologist says that for women, “the apex of development is to weave themselves zestfully into a web of strong relationships that they experience as empowering, activating, honest and close.”³² Your daughter, but not your son, may lose the opportunity to develop the skills that independent research hones.
 4. A book about female friendship called *Girlfriends: Invisible Bonds, Enduring Ties*, by Carmen Renee Berry and Tamara Trader, cites Carol Gilligan as its inspiration.³³ The authors celebrate the fact that when thirty-four-year-old Eileen was feeling blue about returning to work after the birth of her baby, her friend Jenny jettisoned her own plans and offered to care for Eileen's baby. In addition to making the mother feel guilty, this proposal sets the bar for female friendship too high for almost anyone to meet.
 5. If you are a woman who is depressed or anxious or suicidal, your therapist may judge you entirely on your relationships—not on your work or other areas of your life. Women who check into the women's psychiatric unit of the Weill Cornell Westchester Hospital in White Plains, New York, take part in daily teatime and are observed to see how well they relate to other patients.³⁴ A senior social worker confidently justifies this practice: “Carol Gilligan's

work suggests that women's sense of well-being comes from their relationships."

Gilligan's Impact

If Gilligan's view is accurate, the basic and indisputable fact of our gender determines, to a large degree, who we are and how we behave. Our maleness or femaleness dictates our moral development, as well as our preferences, values, priorities, and communication styles—which, once established, don't change. Women's "different voice" is not just different, it's nearly incomprehensible to the opposite sex. As with any influential notion that seeps into the cultural consciousness, this new theory morphed into a simplified, bastardized version of its original. In his phenomenally best-selling *Mars and Venus* books, John Gray tells dozens of stories of men and women whose lives seem to be on separate tracks.³⁵ Patrick, a restaurant designer, comes home from work and wanders into the kitchen, where his live-in girlfriend, Jennifer, is making dinner. He watches her, then asks, "Why are you using those spices?" Jennifer, feeling angry and criticized, blurts out, "I feel like it—that's why." Echoing Gilligan, Gray attributes the tension to deep male and female emotional styles (Martian rationality and Venusian emotionality) when it might just be that Patrick is tired and Jennifer is stressed. If it was Jennifer coming home and Patrick cooking, isn't it possible that the same exchange might have taken place?

It's hard to overestimate Carol Gilligan's impact on nearly every facet of modern life. If you're female—even if you've never heard of Gilligan—your life has been affected by her theories. Do you find yourself excusing men's insensitivity because "that sort of thing is easier for women"? At work, do you turn only to women to help mend rifts and soothe tempers? If you're a manager, when it comes to raises, do you disregard the "people" work one of your female subordinates does every day, since caring comes naturally to her? Do you hesitate to criticize a colleague, even on an important issue, because you don't want to be seen as uncaring?

Gilligan's ideas have also deeply affected the way many men think about women. A woman may find her partner taking it for granted that she'll listen to his problems but not offer to do the same for her. Many women write off that kind of behavior as caused by men's "natural" relationship deficiencies. When a woman expresses her opinion forcefully at work, her male boss may see her as lacking in appropriate feminine skills.

Even at the movies, you see reflections of a Gilliganesque world. In *You've Got Mail*, Tom Hanks is the workaholic owner of a huge bookstore chain when he meets Meg Ryan, the sensitive owner of a venerable children's bookstore. His new store, located in the same neighborhood, drives her out of business, but she puts him in touch with his feelings and teaches him how to be a more humane entrepreneur. He opens a children's department in his new store and hires a PhD in children's literature to run it. Countless other films and television broadcasts pair a thoughtful, caring woman with an aggressively hard-edged man, reinforcing these essentialist notions in the culture.

Gilligan herself has become a media icon. In 1996 *Time* named her one of America's twenty-five most influential people.³⁶ In 2001 Jane Fonda gave Harvard \$12.5 million in Gilligan's name to fund a center on gender issues. (The gift was later rescinded because of the stock market downturn.)³⁷ Recently the *New York Times* cited Gilligan in stories as varied as the review of a TV movie on the life of civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks, an article on a 9/11 fireman, and a story on whether playing with toy soldiers hurts boys.³⁸

More than Gilligan's fame, it's her influence that makes her so important. Her work has spawned a whole body of belief in women's "otherness" from men that has come to be called "female essentialism." You encounter it everywhere—in management texts, newspaper and magazine articles, best-selling books—maybe even in chats with your best friend over coffee.

It's easy to understand why women find Gilligan's theories both familiar and reassuring. Her message resonates with women. *Yes, I really do care about my children, my husband, my friends, and my community. And my caring is a big part of who I am.*

When Gilligan published *In a Different Voice*, women were relieved to see themselves defined not as the second sex or as imitation men or second-class citizens. As the women's movement burgeoned and more and more women found themselves operating in previously all-male domains, some women began to get the message—from society, the media, and their friends—that the only path to personal and professional success was to be as hard-nosed as men. Many were uncomfortable with that model. They did not want to dress like men, talk tough like men, or compete like men. One of Gilligan's research subjects said of her experiences on the job, "I have a great mother complex. I want to help people and be kind to them. I was told to work on that stuff—be more aggressive."³⁹ The time was right for a new message, and Gilligan was there to provide it.

At the time, pundits—male and female—suggested that men would do well to emulate women, and this argument continues to be heard today. *Business Week* decreed "As Leaders, Women Rule," saying that men could take lessons from women about participatory management.⁴⁰ The *Virginia Law Review* suggested that female judges were more compassionate and tuned in to people than male judges were.⁴¹ Gilligan herself suggested that women in the military would humanize the institution.⁴²

If Gilligan had only said that the experience of being an outsider assigned the job of caregiver, peacemaker, and relationship doctor gave many women a valuable angle of vision, her work might have encountered little scientific objection. But she seemed to be arguing that a certain way of thinking and feeling was natural *only* to women but not to men. Others took this idea and built on it—from *Women's Ways of Knowing*⁴³ by Mary Belenky and her colleagues to John Gray and his Mars and Venus books⁴⁴ to Michael Gurian's *The Wonder of Girls*⁴⁵ to a spate of books on management, parenting, friendship, education, marriage, careers. The idea blossomed that women have ways of knowing, ways of thinking, and ways of feeling that are inaccessible to the male mind.

No wonder droves of women embraced her message. Gilligan appeared to be elevating women from the "second sex" to the "better sex":

women as better than men. Better as friends, better as parents, better at everything having to do with relationships, even at the workplace.

There is hardly a sphere of thought and practice that has not been infiltrated by the idea that "care" is central to women's psyches. The prestigious Stone Center at Wellesley College was founded to develop Gilligan's theories (and those of psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller) and apply them to psychotherapy. McLean Hospital, the renowned Harvard teaching hospital, set up a women's center based on these notions. A book on brain function argues that women's brains are actually constructed for caring. "The female brain is predominantly hard-wired for . . . a natural desire to 'care' about others. The male brain is predominantly hardwired for understanding and building systems," says Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Cambridge University.⁴⁶

By the early 1990s, Gilligan's ideas had reconfigured much of the theory underlying training and practice in psychology, psychiatry, and social work; they had been used to argue precedent-setting legal cases on gender discrimination and had made deep inroads into the ranks of educators, reshaping ideas about education and adolescent development around the world. The Linden School in Toronto completely revamped its academic program to conform with Gilligan's theories, aiming to "help young women develop their sense of self by encouraging non-competitive learning."⁴⁷ At this school and many others, math classes were reorganized so that girls would work exclusively in cooperative teams to overcome math anxiety. Female teachers, doctors, judges, managers, journalists, and scholars, essentialists said, would be the ones to restore "care" to the world. How could one slim book (184 pages) exert such far-reaching influence?

Harvard professor Anne Alonso, director of the Center for Psychoanalytic Studies at Massachusetts General Hospital, is dismayed by the lightning speed at which Gilligan's ideas, based on slender evidence, have been absorbed into psychotherapy.⁴⁸ Usually new theories go through a long, rigorous process of publication in peer-reviewed journals before they are accepted by the field. "None of this work has been

published in [such] journals. It's hard to take seriously a whole corpus of work that hasn't been [peer-reviewed]." Charging that no clinical research supports these theories, Alonso calls the "relational self" an idea du jour (she calls it "penis scorn").

Ironically, it wasn't long before the new theory was called on to bolster claims of women's incompetence. Gilligan could never have imagined the ways her work would be used to hurt women. When forty-two women sued Sears, Roebuck and Company in 1984 for sex discrimination, the company cited Gilligan's theories to argue successfully that women do not want better-paying jobs and cannot handle stress, competition, or risk.⁴⁹ The fact that so many women are in low-level jobs is the result of "women's choices," not discrimination, the company argued in this highly publicized case. The state of Virginia cited Gilligan's work in arguing that the Virginia Military Academy should not admit females, even though Gilligan herself wrote a brief saying that her work was being misrepresented.⁵⁰ Despite its author's intentions, Gilligan's theory has become the favorite foundation for arguments that innate differences—not gender discrimination—are responsible for women's slow pace of advancement in the workplace. The essentialist emphasis on gender difference, says Judith Shapiro, president of Barnard College, too often is "feminism doing the work of sexism."⁵¹ (But men, as we will see, can also be damaged if they believe they are deficient in the caring arena.)

Relational theories (and the "caring trap" they engender) have been forcefully challenged over the past two decades, but they remain stubbornly entrenched, still affecting women's and men's jobs, relationships, and personal decisions. In a 2002 Oxygen Media survey, 62 percent of women said that "women in power need to act more like 'real women' and less like men."⁵² Women clearly held other women to a higher standard. Did the belief that women must be kinder, gentler, and more tuned in to others influence their thinking? How could it not have, with Gilligan's ideas so firmly embedded in our culture? (In fact, research shows that people expect women to be nicer than men, and so to get any credit, women have to be "supernice." Men get credit when they're just civil.)⁵³

The recurrent media narrative proclaims that women, since they are so relational, are willing to quit good jobs more often than men are to stay home and care for their children. In March 2002, the *New York Times* ran such a story, referring to Massachusetts Governor Jane Swift and TV host Rosie O'Donnell.⁵⁴ One boldface tag line read: "Some say women have less psychic investment in careers." This idea lingers in spite of solid evidence that it's false. Studies show that male and female managers leave good jobs for exactly the same reasons—for better career opportunities. Staying home with children is not a major reason for men or women to leave their managerial jobs.⁵⁵ But if you are female and your employer believes that you will probably drop out of the workforce, why should he move you up the ladder?

Situation, Not Sex

Can you surmise a person's gender from a description of his or her relationships? You can, if Gilligan is correct. Consider the following comments: "I get almost smotheringly close to people and show my real self. People tell me they're smothered and feel like they lose their identity . . . I guess I am looking for some love affair which takes the mystical 'two are now one' kind of thing. But that frightens a lot of people I have run into." Typical female, right? Actually, the speaker is a man, interviewed by Gilligan herself for a 1980 paper.⁵⁶

The essentialists view the world through the lens of gender, but they ignore a much more important perspective: power. When women use care reasoning, it is because they tend to occupy less powerful positions in society and not because of an innate quality they possess. People in power expect others to listen to them. Aides scurry when Condoleezza Rice or Hillary Clinton wants something done. The aides, however, have to find a way to appeal to their bosses to get what they need and may use care reasoning as a strategy. Those without power develop a sharp attentiveness to the needs of those with power, often resorting to manipulation and duplicity. A political aide, for example, may "suck up" to the candidate's husband and make himself available for any favor

needed. A wife in an abusive relationship may lie and keep secrets in an attempt to avoid her husband's wrath. But people who have power don't have to resort to manipulative techniques; they promote the rules because they benefit from them.

It's crucial to recognize too that people behave differently in different situations—and their behavior is often determined by how much power they have in a given situation, not their sex.

When men control most of the resources in marriage, wives emphasize caring while husbands emphasize rules. (Husband: "The last time your mother was here, we almost got divorced. You agreed that she couldn't stay more than a week." Wife: "But I can't say no to her this time. She can't do anything for herself with a sprained ankle and I'm all she's got." Husband: "We made a deal. I'm not going to change it!") The scenario shifts, however, when these same women deal with their children, now from a position of relative power. (Child: "I really want to stay over at Vanessa's tonight. All the kids will be there." Mother: "You didn't finish your term paper, so no sleepover this time.")

When power shifts, behavior shifts with it. From Carol Gilligan's scholarly publications to John Gray's down-market prose, essentialist feminist writings all miss the mark when it comes to this issue. We'll discuss power in more detail in the next chapter. Gray tells the story of Tom, on his way out the door when he asks his wife, Jane, to pick up his dry cleaning.⁵⁷ Jane responds, "I'm already in a hurry. I have to pick up Mary at school, make two bank deposits, return Timmy's library books, buy groceries for tonight's dinner . . . I just don't know how I can do it all . . . there are so many things I have to do. I still need to give you your phone messages." Gray sees this as a case of the sexes misunderstanding each other because of their innate differences. How about an alternate explanation? Jane has to deal with the kids, the shopping, the banking—she even has to act as Tom's secretary and handle his phone messages. And he has the nerve to ask her to pick up his dry cleaning too? This little drama is really all about who has the power to make demands, and who does not.

If we operate within Gilligan's system, however, anybody who doesn't fit the template—such as the ambitious female or the nurturing male—is an anomaly. She says: "Women not only define themselves in the context of human relationships—but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care."⁵⁸ Is this true? In our thirty-five years of interviewing hundreds of women and studying women's lives, we have found few women who judge themselves *primarily* on the basis of caring, although they do see caring as important to their lives. Miriam and Janelle, whom we cited at the beginning of this chapter, fell into what we call the "caring trap," putting too much emphasis on doing for others at their own expense. Most women, however, have far more balance in their lives. They value caring, but they do not see it as a central defining quality. A writer who concentrates on politics says being a caring person should be a given, for a man or a woman. "But I judge myself on how much of an impact I can make on the world beyond my own little circle."

Hillary Clinton is a highly visible example of power—and caring. In her valedictory speech at Wellesley College, she didn't hesitate to chastise Senator Edward Brooke for supporting the Vietnam War. The justice of her cause was more important to her than his public humiliation. In the White House, she rarely backed off from championing causes that did not win her popular approval. And instead of running for cover after the trauma of her husband's impeachment, she risked more public scrutiny of herself—and her daughter—by entering the Senate race. Despite her not inconsiderable ego, she consistently puts forth a vision of politics based on caring and community. In this, she's a lot like Jimmy Carter, who travels the world promoting peace and picks up a hammer and nails to build inner-city housing.

Circles of Care

Though there is much to take issue with in Carol Gilligan's findings and methodology, she must be applauded for rescuing "care" from the dustbin of second-rate virtues. (For Freud, Erikson, and others, female caring was

attached to an incomplete sense of identity, while male achieving grew from strength.) Women, though they may not define themselves by it, are often in charge of caring for others, and the perspective and compassion that go along with such a role must be appreciated, not demeaned. When Joyce Fletcher at the Simmons School of Management “shadowed” women engineers at work, she discovered that the women got no credit for mentoring others, giving advice, and engaging in other caring activities—and this is true in many workplaces.⁵⁹ Neither men nor women get organizational credit for caring. Professors who spend too much time with students are unlikely to get tenure because they aren’t spending the bulk of their time churning out scholarly papers.

Care reasoning and justice reasoning may be distinct ways of making decisions—and this idea may turn out to be Gilligan’s major contribution to understanding moral development. Gilligan might say that the sexes are stuck with one mode of operating, but we’d like to build on her model of two types of reasoning, and add flexibility. Then both sexes can move from one to the other as the situation demands. A district court judge—male or female—may mete out sentences to criminals based on the magnitude of their crimes, an example of justice reasoning. But when the judge comes home to discover that a daughter broke the neighbor’s window playing baseball, he or she will probably use “care reasoning” in deciding what the child’s punishment should be.

Gilligan believes that all women have a “circle of care,” and that the people within it have first dibs on their attention. One frazzled young working mother recalled asking her own mother, “When is it going to be my turn?” Her mother’s answer was blunt. “It’s never going to be your turn.” To get their own needs met more directly, Gilligan believes, women first have to learn to put themselves inside their own circle of care. But how can this be done? Caring is what you do for others. In this respect today’s young women are no different from their mothers and grandmothers, especially when they become mothers themselves.

Some women discover—to their shock—that once they quit their jobs to stay home with a baby, they fall into “subservient” behavior. They begin to defer to their husbands and put their own desires well

behind those of their husbands and children. Psychologists Philip and Carolyn Cowan of the University of California–Berkeley studied the impact on couples of having a first child; they found that the women’s major complaint was dissatisfaction at slipping into traditional roles, doing more housework and child care than they expected.⁶⁰ One woman says of her journalist husband, “Jim has never changed a diaper in his life . . . sometimes I feel like a single parent with a visiting boyfriend who pays the bills.”⁶¹ RB found much the same situation with female doctors who cut back their work hours.⁶² They picked up many more of the routine household tasks that have been shown to be associated with high psychological distress.

These women are among many people struggling to resolve problems that are stubbornly entrenched, partly because of belief in the notion of gender differences. Jill, twenty-five, a realtor, is dating Steve, a twenty-six-year-old building contractor. She admires his easygoing temperament but finds he makes commitments and doesn’t follow through. He said he would pick up theater tickets for them and her visiting parents, a special surprise. But when her parents arrived, she found out that he had never gotten the tickets. He repeats this pattern over and over. Steve rarely follows through, but he’s always apologetic afterward. Jill struggles because a part of her thinks she shouldn’t make a fuss: “Look, this is a relatively minor flaw, and there are so many other qualities about him that I like.”

Her need to forgive him every time is blocking her access to an important emotion she needs to express: anger. She’s furious with Steve’s behavior, and she’s also angry at herself for feeling annoyed at him. “I hate the way I feel when I’m angry,” she says. “When I’m like this, I don’t feel like myself.” Jill thinks that she’s the one who is supposed to be accommodating and understanding—the one with the “relational self.” She’s afraid that if she makes any real demands on Steve, she will chase him away. If she has to see herself as always kind, always caring, always the “relational” partner, then her anger has to be deflected someplace else—all too often, back at herself. Jill has created this problem by not allowing herself to make any demands in the relationship. In

fact, by silencing herself, she's being unfair to Steve because she's not giving him the chance to be understanding or to respond positively to her needs. If she had expressed her annoyance in past instances and discussed his pattern of unreliability, Steve may well have remembered to pick up the theater tickets.

Phyllis, thirty-five, a highly paid executive, has just given birth to her first child. Her husband, Chet, a thirty-eight-year-old unemployed dot-comer, has been unable to get so much as a job interview for six months. Economically it makes perfect sense for Phyllis to continue to work and for Chet to care for the baby full-time. Phyllis is up for a promotion that will give her even more income and security. But when Chet suggests the obvious—"Let me stay home and take care of the baby"—she feels uneasy and unreasonably upset. She knows he's a caring person and she trusts him more than she would trust a baby-sitter. What holds her back is the fear that even his best care won't be good enough. No one else can be *mommy*. "All my friends think I'm the luckiest person around, that I'm nuts to be worried about this. He's too good to be true. Why is it so hard for me to just let him do this?"

Another couple, interviewed by *Newsweek* for a story titled "She Works, He Doesn't," is also shackled by gender expectations.⁶³ Laurie and Jonathan Earp of Oakland, California, thought they had the perfect life. He was earning a six-figure salary at Napster, while she was consulting part-time as a fund-raiser. Then Jonathan got laid off and couldn't find another job. Laurie stepped into the breach and became the breadwinner; Jonathan cared full-time for their five-year-old son, Dylan.

The only one happy, apparently, was Dylan, who called his dad a great "mom." "This is not the life I wanted," said Laurie as she headed off to an after-dinner meeting. As for Jonathan, he declared of his new life, "I hate it all." If Laurie could admire Jonathan for his ability to care for their son and if Jonathan could be proud of Laurie for keeping the wolf away from the door, they could both get through this rough patch in their lives a lot more easily. This flexibility would allow them to grow as individuals and tap into strengths they never realized they had.

Rigidity is one downside of the caring trap; another is the turf battle that can undermine relationships. Some women have used their care imperative to shut their husbands out of close relationships with their children. Roger and Marilyn, now in their fifties, are divorced and estranged. They married in their early twenties and had a child two years later. Marilyn devoted herself exclusively to caring for their daughter, Gwen. Roger worked long hours at a public relations firm, and he very much wanted his wife and baby daughter to be happy. But whenever he was at home and tried to engage with Gwen, Marilyn stepped in. "Don't give her soda; it'll rot her teeth," she'd tell him. "Don't try to dress her, you don't know where anything is." When he'd offer to take Gwen skating, she'd claim that Gwen wasn't steady on her skates and needed her mother to keep her from falling. Roger's own father had been very distant, so he had no model for being the kind of father he wanted to be. Understandably, he thought it was "right" for Marilyn to be the special parent, so he pulled away. As a result, Marilyn formed a close bond with Gwen and he remained the outsider.

They lived in Cleveland, but Marilyn loved the Berkshires and insisted on taking their child there every summer. Roger resisted. He could only get away for an occasional long weekend and didn't want to spend so much time away from his daughter. In the end, Marilyn prevailed because Roger believed in the natural rightness of Marilyn's decisions about their child: "Hey, she was the mother. Was I supposed to second-guess her?"

Denied any real emotional connection to his daughter, he was relegated to being a checkbook. When the marriage broke up, Roger tried in vain to keep in contact with his daughter. Marilyn had already planted a "family narrative" in Gwen's mind, in which Roger was responsible for all their problems. Gwen, now an adult, accepts her mother's story. When Roger remarried, Gwen refused to go to the wedding and rebuffed every overture Roger made for Gwen to join him and his wife on any number of occasions. Today Roger has no relationship with his daughter, which he bitterly regrets. And Gwen blames her many problems on her father. If

he had been able, early on, to challenge Marilyn instead of withdrawing, Roger might have formed a real connection with his daughter. Instead, both father and daughter miss out.

For Cynthia Danaher, buying into a Gilliganesque idea of what a woman manager should be nearly sabotaged her career.⁶⁴ A newly promoted Hewlett-Packard executive, she confided to her employees that she was scared and needed their help. "I was brought up to believe that if I did what was best for everyone, and made others comfortable, I was a good person." She soon learned that what people—and the company—really wanted was a skilled manager who could make tough decisions. She exchanged her tentative management style for a more decisive one and now cringes at her old words. "People say they want a leader just like them but deep down, they want to believe you have the skill to move and fix things they can't."

Danaher was able to change, but others who buy into essentialist stereotypes never figure out how to ask for what they really need in their relationships or how to step out of rigid roles without feeling like failures. The "relational self" is simply old wine in new bottles. Whether women's "otherness" comes from perceived frailty and weakness or from perceived moral superiority and strength, it remains a harmful stereotype.

What About Men?

At first glance, relational theories may seem to be win-win for men. They get to be taken care of, and they can opt out when an aging parent needs care, a friend is in trouble, a coworker needs help, or a child wants to be comforted. But probe a bit more deeply, and you see that men too are harmed by essentialism. They may well shrink from situations that call for caring abilities. They may pull back from involved parenting, as Roger did, in the belief that it belongs in the natural sphere of their wives. But in doing so, they are damaging their marriages and cutting themselves off from a prime source of emotional enrichment.

One study showed that when men do almost as much child care as their wives their psychological well-being soars and they get an added bonus—their wives evaluate the marriage more positively.⁶⁵ This was true for men whether they held conventional ideas about child care or more liberal views. Conversely, men who see caring as woman's work pay a high price in diminished physical and emotional health.

In another major study, men who had good relationships with their kids and were deeply involved with them had fewer illnesses than more distant fathers. What's more, job problems create high distress for men unless they have good relationships with their children, which buffer them from career stress.⁶⁶ You see young fathers carrying their babies in Snugglis in the supermarket, coaching their daughters' soccer teams, picking their toddlers up from day care. Many young men want this closeness and focus more on fatherhood than did men in earlier generations. A national survey by the Radcliffe Public Policy Center, released in 2000, found men between the ages of twenty and thirty-nine more likely than older men to give family matters top billing over career success.⁶⁷ Eighty-two percent put family first and 71 percent would sacrifice part of their pay to have more time with their families.

In contrast, men who don't have close relationships with family or friends are at higher risk for heart attacks and other health problems—they die at four times the rate of men who have such ties. Gilligan's claim that men are poorly equipped to succeed at relationships is literally a death sentence.

Life After Gilligan

Women are moving with astonishing speed and in large numbers into what used to be exclusively male turf. They are being told that there's nothing they can't achieve; they should "Just Do it!" as the Nike ad says; they can be "An Army of One." In films, swooning females have been replaced by tough, killer dames like Lara Croft, tomb raider, the kick-butt new Charlie's Angels, and Xena, warrior princess. These days, the

female of the species is more deadly than the male—at least in Hollywood's eyes.

But many women don't want to be professional athletes, killer executives, or karate queens. Carol Gilligan gives them a gentler, kinder narrative, and that's a big part of her enduring popularity. At the same time, global terrorism and economic uncertainty have made Americans feel they are in dire peril. At times like this, people cling to the familiar, and the idea of the caring female and traditional "family values" have a comforting resonance.

Today's young women find themselves in a particularly tough bind. They are the best-educated group of females in history, they have unprecedented access to good colleges, medical schools, law schools, business schools. They can aspire to be judges, cops, DAs, astronauts, pro basketball players, tenured professors, members of Congress, heads of companies. Yet, even as women take these advances for granted, they realize they are dealing with an incomplete revolution. They are shocked by how little help they get when they try to combine their work and family lives. They lag far behind their European sisters in the support systems that make juggling work and family possible. They have little paid maternity or paternity leave, little paid family leave in the event of sickness or emergencies. While more professional women get paid leave than lower-level workers, it's still spotty. Nevertheless, contrary to media stories about high-powered women dropping out, the data don't show any such trend.

At the same time, a woman's circle of care seems to put more demands on her than ever before. Once upon a time, a young mother was content if her child was basically happy and healthy. Today she has to make sure that her daughter can read by three, isn't picking up eating habits that lead to obesity, isn't watching violent television, is relating well to her peers, and is primed to enter a good preschool that will start her on the road to a top-notch college. This vigilance starts even before her child is born. A popular pregnancy manual instructs mothers to avoid sugar: "If you feel a need for sweets, don't eat the cake or the cookie—take a bite, savor it in your mouth for a minute, then spit it out." A bit extreme? We think so.

Asked to do an impossible job—care for everybody—women find themselves overwhelmed. The need for care flows like a stream of water that never dries up. And as we live longer, the stream gets wider, carrying our children, our parents, maybe our husband's parents, our siblings, our friends, our children's schools, our community, a whole range of volunteer organizations.

A recent National Academy of Science study found that people caring for relatives with Alzheimer's suffered damage to their immune systems and were vulnerable to sickness, including heart disease and cancer.⁶⁸ Women who spend much more time caring for others than they spend doing what they want to do risk feelings of helplessness and chronic depression.

We can wear the straitjacket of the relational self, which hinders us from ever putting ourselves first and diminishes men's opportunities for fully realized lives. Or we can break free of the caring trap and see both sexes as resilient people who behave differently in different situations. The choice is ours.