

## A Radical Approach to Rethinking Gender

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“Look, Daddy, it’s a *fru-fru!*”

I was walking my two youngest daughters in their double stroller. Katie was three and just saw, lying in the gutter, one of those oversized foam hands, with the index finger raised indicating “We’re Number One!” that fans wave at football games. Of course, the official name for this pep-rally paraphernalia isn’t a *fru-fru*. I don’t know what the technical term of this object is, and obviously neither did my daughter, but that didn’t stop her from immediately coming up with an appropriate name.

Just as nature abhors a vacuum, language abhors a wordless concept. Although some have argued that language *determines* thinking, virtually everyone agrees that, at least, language *influences* thinking. As stated by the linguistic determinist Benjamin Whorf, “Language itself shapes a man’s basic ideas” (as cited in Myers, 2010, p. 391). Likewise, Ludwig Wittgenstein contends, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (as cited in Pinker, 2002, p. 207). On the other hand, Steven Pinker, who rejects the notion that language imprisons thought, admits, “Language surely does affect our thoughts...[but] language is not *the same thing* as thought” (p. 209). David Myers states succinctly, “Our words may not *determine* what we think, but they do *influence* our thinking...To expand language is to expand our ability to think” (p. 392).

This is especially true when it comes to gender and sex differences. For example, did you notice that Whorf said that language shapes a *man’s* ideas? Writing in the 1930’s, it probably never occurred to him that *man*, in this context, is sexist, as his very words shape the idea that *men*, not women or children, are the ones with ideas worth considering. Of course, Whorf himself would likely argue that his use of *man* refers to the human family and not just adult males. I would agree that, in this regard, this is correct (although politically incorrect by today’s standards) but it is hard to argue that the use of *Man* doesn’t influence one to think it is *men* who are doing the thinking.

Ten years after my daughter, as a toddler, coined the word *fru-fru*, she participated in her middle school’s dance exhibition. As her proud single parent, I naturally thought that not only she was the best dancer in her group, but that her group had the best dance. So after the performance, my daughter wisely asked, “Other than *my* performance, which dance did you like best?” To this I replied, “The six-grade dance called *HERstory*.” *Herstory* was an obvious play on the word *history*, as the dance told the story of several famous historical women including Helen Keller, Anne Frank, Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, and others. Naturally all of the dancers were female. Come to think of it, 100% of the dancers who participated that night were female.

What’s going on? Weren’t Gene Kelly, Gregory Hines, and even the dancing penguin Mambo in the Disney movie *Happy Feet* all male dancers? Where were all the male dancers in middle school? Where were all the female members in a school chess club? Some will argue this is a result of sociocultural expectations. Others will argue it is a matter of biological epigenetic differences. I *tried* to encourage my daughters to play my favorite sport, table tennis, yet in spite of the fact size has no bearing on one’s ability to play, and the fact their grandmother was the first female player to break the gender barrier and compete with the men in our city, both daughters eschewed table tennis, and embraced figure skating and/or dance.

As more and more research is being done to examine why females and males exhibit different interests and behavior, the language of our past is interfering with progressive thinking. Now, I am not proposing we eliminate words like *history* and replace it with *herstory*. Nor do I think *waitstaff* is an appropriate word to describe either a *waiter* or *waitress*. *Server* is gender-neutral and far more euphonious.

Yet it cannot be denied that words influence our thinking, if not consciously, at least at the unconscious level. Words describe ideas. Ideas change, even though words may not. For example, right now I am wearing a pair of *glasses*. You don't have to be a linguist to figure out the word *glasses* comes from the word *glass*. Only today *glasses* aren't made of glass; they're made of polycarbonate or other plastics. The idea of a pair of glass lenses shaped to correct vision, has changed to a pair of polycarbonate lenses shaped to correct vision. However, we do not say, "Has anyone seen my *polycarbonates*?" We say, "Has anyone seen my *glasses*?" The word remains unchanged even though the object it describes *has* changed. This isn't a moot point. By maintaining the same word we hold on to erroneous concepts. This might become evident if one decided to clean their *glasses* by using *glass cleaner*. Windex® and other cleaners contain chemicals like ammonia which aren't harmful to glass, but can ruin plastic lenses. Of course, this error would be less likely to occur if our glasses were no longer called *glasses*.

Often, a new concept is described by using an old word, but adding a new definition. Unfortunately, this can create confusion, especially when the old definition dominates the new concept. I propose that the very words we use to describe sex, gender, and sexual relationships are sexist, misleading, and/or confusing. It is time to coin new words for a modern, precise, non-sexist vocabulary.

In his book *Why Gender Matters* (2005), Leonard Sax deliberately chose to use the word *gender* when the official word is *sex*. According to the textbook I use for teaching my Developmental Psychology course, Kathleen Berger states, "For social scientists *sex* and *sexual* refer to biological male/female characteristics and *gender* refers to cultural and social characteristics" (Berger, 2008, p. 417). Sax, however, eschews this rigid nomenclature and argues that the word *sex* often implies *sexual activity* rather than biological differences. Even worse, using the word *sex* makes on-line access to articles more difficult. Sax explains:

*The problem with using the "s" word [sex] three times in the opening paragraphs of a web site is that many web filters will block the page. This problem is particularly severe for schools and school districts, which tend to use very strict blocking programs. So please forgive me for using the word "gender" when the "s" word would actually be correct (Sax, 2010).*

Sax has a good point about *sex*. His goal is not to thwart the status quo, but to "minimize confusion and maximize clarity" (Sax, 2005, appendix). I am all for that, but my pet peeve is using one word when you mean another. For example, what do we mean by the word *temperament*? The official definition is "Inborn differences between one person and another" (Berger, 2008 p. 185). Thus, *temperament* would always be genetic in origin. Yet in common parlance, *temperament* refers to one's personality traits, whether genetic in origin or not. Even Berger slips up and says, "Some basic temperamental differences are innate" (p.186). This implies some temperamental differences are *not* innate (inborn), which, by definition, is impossible. Of course, environmental and learning can *affect* temperamental traits such as fearfulness, but it makes no logical sense to suggest that something which, by definition, *is* inborn, is sometimes *not* inborn.

So the problem Sax has with *sex* is that the common use of that word, which refers to the sexual act, is often confused with the scientific use, which refers to biological differences between males and females. However, using the word *gender* rather than *sex*, to avoid one kind of confusion, only creates another. If *gender* refers to social and cultural traits, and you are using the term to refer to biological genetic traits, you have only gone out of the frying pan, into the fire.

The problem with language is that there isn't always an available word that accurately describes what one is trying to say. So I propose a new word: **GIST**.

**GIST** is an acronym for **Genetic Innate Sexual Temperament**. As the name **GIST** implies, each person has an inborn genetic temperament that relates to their sexual identity and behavior that has a *biological* origin. Actually, all the words of the acronym *gist* are redundant, eliminating any confusion as to what the word means.

The *gender* of a person is the learned social and cultural factors that make someone masculine or feminine; the *gist* of a person are the inherited biological factors that make someone male or female.

Obviously both factors interact, and I do not intend to suggest otherwise; or that *gist* is more important than *gender*, or vice-versa. I am simply agreeing that if we use the word *sex* instead of *gist*, we confuse the two very different meanings of the word *sex*.

For example there is the joke about the precocious daughter who, on examining her mother's drivers license, declared, "Mommy, now I know why Daddy left us; it says here on your driver's license that you got an 'F' in Sex!"

Of course, the word *gist* already has one definition as, "the central point or meaning of something." One synonym of *gist* is *essence*, which my Encarta computer dictionary describes as "the quality or nature of something that identifies it or makes it what it is." If we think about it, the *gist* of a person and the *sex* of a person, are already closely related.

So my modest proposal is that instead of talking about the difference between *sex* and *gender*, or talking about the difference between biological epigenetic gender traits and socio-cultural gender traits, we adopt the word *GIST* (or *gist*) and talk simply about the difference between *gist* and *gender*. *Gist* is to *gender*, as *nature* is to *nurture*.

Three words, *gist*, *gender*, and *sex*, are less confusing and better than two.

As long as I am on a roll, allow me to introduce another new word: **SOLL**.

Years ago, I needed to describe a concept for which no word existed. I was working as an addictions counselor and interviewing clients to discover, among other things, their family structure. Typically, I asked, "Are you married, single, separated, or divorced?" I soon discovered that asking if someone was *married* was not sufficient. Although formal marriage may be our society's cultural norm, many clients had lived with a partner for years without marriage. The awkward, but politically correct term *significant other* was often used in this case, as a substitute for *spouse*. However, there is a world of difference between a *significant other* and a *spouse*. A *significant other* could be your mother, a brother, or even a close friend, which is entirely different than a husband, wife, or live-in-lover. So I coined the word **SOLL**. A *soll* describes an intimate relationship with a partner you live with, regardless of whether you are legally married, or not. Your husband or wife would most likely be your *soll*, but not necessarily. If you were legally married but separated from your wife, and living with another woman; that other woman, and not your wife, would be your *soll*. *Soll* is a homonym of the word *soul*, and *sole*. The precise meaning of *Soll* is becomes evident when we realize it is an acronym for **Significant Other Live-in Lover**.

I was amazed at how many people had *solls* but weren't married to them. When I asked why, many said they couldn't afford the expense of a formal legal divorce, even though they had been living with their new partner for years. Nor is a *soll* the same as a *boyfriend* or *girlfriend*. You could have a girlfriend you love deeply, but if she lives across town, then she isn't your *soll*. If you are engaged to be married, then your fiancée could be your *soll* but only if the two of you are already living together. Otherwise, she wouldn't be your *soll* anymore than she would be your *wife*. In other words, a *spouse* is someone you are married to, regardless of whether or not you are living together; but a *soll* is someone you live with, regardless of whether or not you are married. Yet *soll* implies more. It implies someone is your *sole* partner. It implies someone is your *soul mate*. When you tell someone, "This is my *soll*," you are implying she is someone you love.

Look again at the preceding sentence. Something is wrong. Even as I imply the word *soll* is needed to accurately describe a relationship for which we do not have a better word, there is another word which creates an assumption that may not be true. That word is *she*. When I said "...*she* is someone you love..." I am implying that you are a *man* and your *soll* is a woman. This could very well be the case, but it excludes the valid alternative that you are a *woman* and your *soll* is a man. Moreover, it ignores the possibility that you are a *man* and your *soll* is also a man. Likewise it also ignores the possibility that you are a *woman* and your *soll* is a woman, too. Homosexual relationships exist, and it's about time we had a word available, like *soll*, which puts them on the same par as heterosexual relationships. Gay marriages may be legal in only a few of the fifty

states, but gay people who have *solls* are in all fifty. Recently on *American Idol*, Ellen DeGeneres, commented in response to the duet performance of *Have You Ever Really Loved a Woman*, “Yes, as a matter of fact, I have loved a woman” (aired on Fox, May 11, 2010).

Three words, *husband*, *wife*, and *soll*, are less confusing and better than two.

Perhaps even more important than adopting the word *soll*, our language needs a new word that means “he or she.”

*He* is obviously sexist as it implies a man, and not a woman. *She* is even more sexist, as it indicates, by common custom and usage, that the subject is a woman and not a man. It is better to use the term *he* when you do not know the sex of the person, since *he* can mean *he or she*, but *she* almost invariably means only *she*. Yet many new books, in a futile but desperate attempt to be politically correct, avoid the sexist word *he*, but substitute the word *she*. When an author writes, “If the student studies hard *she* can become a doctor,” the reader naturally assumes the student is a female. Nor does the tendency to use *she* instead of *he* always favor women. Consider the following sentence, “Whether *she* is a kleptomaniac or not, a shoplifter knows *she* is doing something wrong.” It would be difficult to argue that the author of such a statement chose the word *she* instead of *he*, because the exclusive use of *he* is sexist against women. If you don’t know the sex of someone, using the word *he* is preferable to using the word *she*.

Better, however, isn’t good enough. Why should we use *he* if we mean *he or she*? I do not propose we adopt the word *heorshe* as it would be difficult to say, difficult to read, and difficult to spell. Of course, we could always write *he or she*, but since these pronouns are used so often, it would be far better to adopt one simple word for a pronoun than means either male or female.

I propose we adopt an entirely new word, a non-sexist pronoun, which rhymes with both *he* and *she*. The new pronoun would be *le*.

Try it: “When you tell someone, ‘This is my *soll*,’ you are implying *le* is someone you love.”

Why *le*? For one thing it is a homonym of the male name *Lee* and the female name *Leigh*. Moreover, it is simple, short and sweet, rhyming with other two-letter pronouns including *he*, *me*, and *we*. Moreover, words beginning with “L” roll easily off the tongue.

*Le* provides the missing pronoun for one of four possibilities of sexual identity: (1) male – *He*, (2) female – *She*, (3) neither male nor female – *It*, and (4) either male or female – *Le*.

Yet *le*, alone, is not enough. If a doctor is known to be male you could say, “*He* is a doctor; you are *his* patient; listen to *him*.” If the doctor is known to be a female you could say, “*She* is a doctor; you are *her* patient; listen to *her*.” But suppose you don’t know the sex of the doctor. You could use *le*, but only part of the problem would be solved: “*Le* is a doctor; you are *his or her* patient; listen to *him or her*.” But what words should we use with *le*, if we mean “*his or her*” or “*him or her*?” Should the possessive form of *le* be *lis* to rhyme with *his*, or should it be *ler*, to rhyme with *her*. I nominate the word *lis*, as it rhymes with *his* (masculine) but is a homonym of the name *Liz* (feminine, as in *Liz Taylor*). Also it corresponds closely to the possessive style of *le*’s, only it is easier to pronounce and spell. And if we choose the possessive form *lis*, then it only makes sense to use the word *lim*, too.

Thus, if you know someone is a doctor, but you don’t know whether *le* is a man or a woman, you could say, “*Le* is a doctor; you are *lis* patient; listen to *lim*.”

By the way, in the previous sentence, did you notice I used the word *le*, not once, but *twice*? Look again. I’m betting the first use of *le* seemed so natural in the phrase, “whether *le* is a man or a woman” that it escaped your conscious awareness. Likewise, the words *lis* and *lim* will soon sound natural, too. Of course, you could avoid sexist bias using the words *they*, *their*, and *them*; but these words are the plural form, and it would be erroneous to imply there is more than one, when talking about a single person.

Why should we adopt *le*? Why not simply keep *he*?

For one thing, it is awkward and confusing. In the preface of many books the author either apologizes for using *he* or adopts a system that makes things worse. One editor decided to always use *he* when the chapter was written by a man, and always use *she* when the chapter was written by a woman. Another author, who was female, decided that since the universal use of *he* was sexist, she would adopt the universal use of *she*.

Unfortunately, reading her book about psychology gave the impression that the only people who needed psychotherapy were women, and the only ones who could help them were female therapists.

Traditionally, the accepted standard for pronouns, when one doesn't know whether the subject is male or female, is to exclusively insert the sexist male pronouns *he*, *him*, *his*, or *himself*. Admittedly this provides consistency, but at a price. The exclusive use of the male pronoun ignores the possibility the subject might be female.

Just one of the innumerable examples of this male-sexist approach is aptly illustrated by quoting from Ashley Montague's 1981 book *Growing Young*:

*How does it come about that the human infant is born in a state so immature that it takes an average of nine months before **he** can even crawl, and another four to six months before **he** can walk? A good many years will elapse before the human child will cease to depend on others for **his** very survival (p. 79). [Bold font is added in this and following examples of quotations.]*

In contrast, there is a more modern approach that attempts to "solve" the problem by reversing the sexism. Instead of the standard sexist universal use of *he*, some authors substitute the non-standard, just-sexist, exclusive use of *she*. One of many authors who have adopted this approach is Marc Hauser (2006) who wrote:

*If we are good teachers, and if the child is ready to grow, then **she** will discover the glory of conceptual change. **Her** errors will fade into the distant past as **she** masters **her** world. **She** will discover that where **she** has a will, **she** has a way (p. 225).*

Yet even Hauser fails to consistently use *she* all of the time to designate *he or she*. He made an exception, talking about plastic surgery, when he referred to an MTV documentary in which three people who got plastic surgery were female and one was male. Now, if *she* means *he or she*, why did he write "Each of these people decided on plastic surgery because *he or she* decided a change would make *them* feel better by feeding *their* desire to look different" (p. 182). Note, that by using the words *them* and *their* (plural) instead of the more grammatically correct *her* (singular), Hauser inadvertently implies that when *one* person gets plastic surgery, *all four of them* feel better.

So let's see now, when the odds are 50/50 the person is female ("a child"), Hauser uses "*she*;" but when the odds are 75/25 the person is a male (three women and one man), he uses "*he or she*."

Ironically, even as Hauser attempts to "right the wrong" with the reverse discrimination of using *she* to refer to a developing child, he inadvertently resurrects the antiquated notion that females are more infantile and childlike than mature men. Likewise other authors who use this approach have referred to addicts and mental patients universally as *she*. Admittedly, it is unfortunate that pejorative terms like *addicts* or *mental patients* carry such negative connotations. Yet one wonders how it will increase that status of women to that of men, when the exclusively arbitrary use of *she* implies that females are more likely to suffer from mental and behavioral disorders than males. Besides, statistically men are more likely to have problems with addiction than women, and women are more likely to have problems with depression than men.

Simply stated, language should make sense. My friend Rita had twins, *a boy and a girl*. Telling this personal information to others often elicited, to her chagrin, the following irrational inquiry: "Twins? Really? Are they identical?" Now, you don't have to know that *monozygotic twins* are identical, or that *dizygotic twins* are fraternal, to figure out that twins can't be *identical* if one is a boy, and the other is a girl!

Nevertheless, the lack of the pronoun *le*, can create this erroneous impression, as when Steven Pinker (2002) uses *she* in the following passage from his book *The Blank Slate*:

*Imagine that you are agonizing over a choice, which career to pursue ...You have finally staggered to a conclusion when the phone rings. It is the identical twin you never knew you had. During the joyous conversation it comes out that **she** has chosen a similar career (p. 51).*

When the author says “imagine that you” I imagine that’s *me*. I can imagine having an identical twin; but it is difficult for me to imagine that I, a male, have an identical twin who is a female, since “*she* has chosen a similar career.” Of course, since identical twins are always the same sex, maybe the problem is that I never before realized that *I* was a female.

Of course, another approach is to avoid the use of *he* or *she* altogether, and instead insert the neuter pronoun *it*. Here we see Sarah Hrdy describe the newborn infant as an *it* (as cited in Hauser, p.246). “By the time the baby is expelled by the uterine muscles, *it* must be prepared for *its* exile from gestational Eden.”

As confusing as the above examples are, things only get worse when, in the attempt to avoid sexism and create fairness, both *he* and *she* are randomly selected. Note that in the following quotes by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), from his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, that one automatically assumes the sex of the subject changes as the pronoun changes. One cannot read this passage without assuming that violinists and rock climbers are females, whereas chess players and runners are males:

*The absence of the self from consciousness does not mean that a person in flow has given up control of **his** psychic energy, or that **she** is unaware of what happens in **her** body or in **her** mind...A violinist must be extremely aware of every movement of her fingers, as well as the sound entering **her** ears, and of the total form of the piece **she** is playing...A good runner is usually aware of every relevant muscle in **his** body, or the rhythms of **his** breathing...A chess player could not enjoy the game if **he** were not able to retrieve from **his** memory, at will, previous positions, past combinations...The climber, focusing all **her** attention on the rock wall that will have to support **her** weight safely (p. 64).*

Is there a politically correct solution to this madness, *without* coming up with new vocabulary? There is. We could always use *he* or *she* (or if you prefer *she* or *he*) instead of *he*, or *she*. However, notice how annoying it sounds to use this politically correct polysyllabic solution:

*The absence of the self from consciousness does not mean that a person in flow has given up control of **his or her** psychic energy, or that **he or she** is unaware of what happens in **his or her** body or in **his or her** mind...A violinist must be extremely aware of every movement of **his or her** fingers, as well as the sound entering **his or her** ears, and of the total form of the piece **he or she** is playing...A good runner is usually aware of every relevant muscle in **his or her** body, or the rhythms of **his or her** breathing...A chess player could not enjoy the game if **he or she** were not able to retrieve from **his or her** memory, at will, previous positions, past combinations...The climber, focusing all **his or her** attention on the rock wall that will have to support **his or her** weight safely.*

If you found yourself skipping through the above without torturing yourself into reading every *he* or *she*, you are forgiven. The above may be politically correct and logically accurate, but is far too awkward and verbose to endure.

Now, please, compare the inclusion of new non-sexist pronouns, *Le* and *Lis*:

*The absence of the self from consciousness does not mean that a person in flow has given up control of **lis** psychic energy, or that **le** is unaware of what happens in **lis** body or in **lis** mind...A violinist must be extremely aware of every movement of **lis** fingers, as well as the sound entering **lis** ears, and of the total form of the piece **le** is playing...A good runner is usually aware of every relevant muscle in **lis** body, or the rhythms of **lis** breathing...A chess player could not enjoy the game if **le** were not able to retrieve from **lis** memory, at will, previous positions, past combinations...The climber, focusing all **lis** attention on the rock wall that will have to support **lis** weight safely.*

It's new. It's different. It takes time to get used to, but even if it seems a little unfamiliar at first, it makes logical sense, and provides a schema for "he or she" or "his or her" without being overly wordy.

Three pronouns, *he*, *she*, and *le*, are less confusing and better than two.

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