Chapter II
Dualisms and Stereotypes: Tools of Domination

OBJECTIVES

This chapter aims to help you understand the following:

- The gender boxes of male and female and why gender is the ultimate dualism.
- How dualisms such as gender and either/or thinking serve as tools of domination.
- How stereotypes influence our perceptions of ourselves and each other.
- Some classic gender and race stereotypes.
- Some ways in which stereotypes "keep us in our place" by influencing our self-concept, our academic performance (stereotype threat), our sense of possibilities, and our expectations of each other.

INTRODUCTION

Dualisms are a hallmark of dominator societies, and dualistic thinking is a deeply-embedded attitude that shapes our values and beliefs. The deficiency of dualistic thinking is that it encourages us to organize knowledge in simplistic "either/or" terms, rather than considering the "both/and" complexities of our human experience. Gender is socially-defined in dualistic terms; one is *either* male *or* female. Understanding gender, the ultimate dualism, can help one begin to grasp the ways in

which gendered attitudes and beliefs are reflected in the social institutions through which we learn about IT.

The stereotypes (of gender, race, physical ability, age, etc.) that are purveyed by our social institutions are one of the most enduring and significant ways in which we all learn our sense of identity and "appropriate" location in the social hierarchy, as well as how we perceive and categorize others. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of stereotypes and their influence is critical to beginning to understand how we all continue to participate in recreating a dominator society.

Dualisms and stereotypes are two of the most pervasive and powerful tools of a dominator social system. Audre Lorde (1984) explains that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 110). If we are ever to lay down these tools and construct a different house for our human community, we must understand how proficient we have all become at using the dominator tools of dualistic thought and stereotyping.

GENDER: THE ULTIMATE DUALISM

Understanding gender is not about saying "all men are this" and "all women are that." As described in Chapter I, the ways in which individuals understand and manifest gender is influenced by multiple factors—innate individual traits, family, culture and community, social institutions, and national ethos. In this book, my focus is on understanding the messages we receive about gender from our dominant social institutions in the U.S. Individuals may perceive gender slightly differently based on differences at other layers of influence, but they will also typically participate in reifying the dominant culture's notions of gender, at least to some extent.

Some of us begin to learn about gender before we are even born. Some researchers have shown that parents who know the sex of their babies will talk to them in the womb differently, beginning to teach boys to be "hard" and girls to be "soft." The sex of infants is often not easily identifiable, especially when they are all little round hairless lumps. So, our social institutions help us to make their sex (and implicitly gender) clearer with the blue-pink nature of baby clothes, toys, and even other functional items like blankets or bibs. However, few today know how recent this social development is to associate pink with girls and blue with boys. During the 1800s in the U.S., all babies wore little white dresses. This began to change at the turn of the 20th century "as plumbing, cloth diapers, and color-fast fabrics" were more available (Feinberg, 1996, p. 106). We did not settle on the blue=masculine and pink=feminine color scheme until after a debate in mass media over two paintings: Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* and Sir Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie*. The problem with this color-coding is that few people easily fit one category. In *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, Leslie Feinberg