Ws the Luck of the Draw, Baby: Gender Behavior and High-Stress Situations

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"It's The Luck of the Draw, Baby":
Gender Behavior and High-Stress Situations

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Gender difference is a big seller in the popular press. Books by authors like literary critic Camille Paglia, psychologist Deborah Tannen, and John Gray defy feminist rhetoric, analyze conversational narrative, and invoke the gods to tell us what we've known all along: men and women are different.

While many contemporary authors focus their research on biological and psycho-social differences, most seem little interested in gender similarities. Putting biological similarities aside, some scholars have been bold enough to suggest that psychological and social constructs can be used to identify and study gender similarities (as well as differences) between men and women (Bem 1974; Chodorow 1978; Fisher and Arnold 1990; Frable 1989; Lorber 1994). Interested in dissolving rather than highlighting gender differences, Lorraine (1990) invites researchers to try to "get past the gender categories that restrict us." This notion of looking "beyond gender" has been used to approach organizational management styles (Sayre 1989).

If, as Gilligan's (1982) proponents suggest, behavior is sex specific, then male and female responses to the same situation should be different. However, if we accept Lorber's notion that gender is a social construction or Bem's concept that identities are composed of gendered strategies which can be found in varying amounts in both sexes, then situational responses may reveal more similarities than differences.

In order to test these notions of gender, we chose to investigate sex-role behavior in a high-stress situation. This study looks at similarities and differences between men and women caught in the high-stress conditions surrounding natural disaster to answer the question, "Is gendered behavior enhanced or diminished by the presence of stress?"

GENDERED THINKING

Foucault (1978) implies that gender is contemplated as one of the largest and least escapable contours of meaning in human life. In order to define those contours, Smith (1992) reports three theses of gender: Arbitrariness (gender is produced by our own choices that could be made differently); Impairment (gender is harmful to whoever is gendered); and Asymmetry (gender system is a power differential). In the spirit of arbitrariness, this study aligns itself with Margaret Mead's notion that "men and women are capable of being molded to a single pattern as easily as to a diverse one" (1963:313).

The process of molding lends itself to defining gender as something that is enacted from birth, constantly and by everyone; individuals experience gender within a social context. As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways human beings use to organize their lives (Lorber 1994). In this context it is important to distinguish human action from animal behavior by recognizing that formal social institutions do not exist among animals. While primate behavior has been used to prove the universality of sex
differences (Haraway 1978), animals' sex differences cannot be understood in the same way as humans' gender differences due to the absence of social ordering, such as marriage and kinship, in nature. Past research (Douglas 1973; MacCormack 1980; Ormer and Whitehead 1981) makes a strong case for the argument that humans create gender and age-group categories that are socially, and not necessarily physiologically, different. In fact, Epstein (1988) has shown that human males and females are more alike than different in traits and behavior when compared to sexes of other species.

Lorber (1984:30-31) identifies components of gender as a social institution; a relevant component viewing gender as a social institution for this study is gendered divisions of labor (Petchesky 1979), defined as the assignment of productive and domestic work to members of different gender statuses—the higher the status, the more prestigious and valued the work and the greater its rewards.

Three relevant components of gender for an individual are: gender identity, the individual's sense of gendered self as a worker and family member; gendered personality, internalized patterns of socially normative emotions as organized by family structure and parenting; and gendered processes, the social practices of behavior already learned to be gender-appropriate, i.e. "doing gender" as a member of a gender status in relationships with gendered others, and acting different.

CONDITIONS OF STRESS

Stress as it relates to human behavior is well-explored in psychology and counseling literature, and this study does not attempt to expand upon that literature. Rather, we define stress as the result of feeling pressure from time constraints, from multiple tasking within restricted timeframes, and periods of compressed decision-making with important consequences for self and others. Assuming that gender manifests itself in the norms of everyday interaction, we are interested in how stress changes those norms. According to Illich (1982), each gender domain has its own rhythm and time. Anthropological studies (see Buckley and Gottlieb 1988) suggest that women's time is cyclical (driven by menstrual periods) while men's is linear. Janika Vandoerwilde (McClary 1991) uses standard musical notation to represent two contrasting images of time that seem to be symbolically gendered. Men's time, she says, corresponds to Western music with striving, climax and closure, while women's musical time is likened to "a musical image of childbirth" that creates a sense of existence in time that is stable, ordered, yet "timeless" (McClary 1991:117-18). Although explicit research on the temporal aspects of gender is scarce, Sabean (1979) found evidence that time pressure is a factor in levels of disturbance for men and women, specifically that time pressure is felt much more disturbingly by women than men.

Natural disaster is an instance where time pressure has proven to generate reflexive, even Pavlovian, behavior by participants and victims (Drabek 1986; Wolfenstein 1957). Disaster literature suggests that context of disaster is best examined in phases, pointing out that with each phase, the level of individual stress increases to a point and then decreases. According to Quarantelli (1979), stress implies a condition in which the victim has inadequate resources to cope with the demands of the disaster, and that stress is intrinsic to the interplay between demand levels and response capacities. This paper reports stress levels encountered during a pre-disaster warning and evacuation condition and a post-disaster reconstruction period. In the first condition, prior to the threat of destruction by fire, residents are asked to evacuate their homes. Making choices of what to take brings a high level of pressure on immediate response capacity. During the reconstruction period, victims must replace all their lost possessions, a stress-producing activity that often requires overwhelming, time-intensive decision-making conditions.
Evacuation and replacement investigations in this study draw from actual situations and primary data gathered from real people following real disasters.

A PROFILE OF THE SAMPLES AND METHODOLOGY

Two data-sets, gathered during research conducted in separate disaster populations following geographically separate residential fires two years apart were used for this analysis. The samples are reflective of the demographics of survivors from each disaster population. Sample ages ranged from college students to seniors, and economic status spanned that of dependents to millionaires, with a definite skew toward the upper-income, older homeowner population. Equally representative of men and women, a total of 88 depth interviews from both populations yielded data rich in anecdotal and emotionally charged material. Later, surveys collected from the most recent disaster victims provided statistical evidence of stress-related behavior.

For the first study, one author personally interviewed 69 men and women ages 19 to 88 who were forced to evacuate their homes. Informants were contacted through personal acquaintances, homeowners' associations and the Phoenix Journal, a disaster community publication. Volunteers were asked to recall their experience before and after the fire, and to discuss what they took with them, why the items were valued, and a historical perspective of the items' acquisition. Both disaster locations are adjacent to college campuses, rendering the idea of scholastic research familiar and non-threatening to residents. College students were interviewed in their dorm cafeterias; adults were questioned in their residences. All interviews were recorded on audiotape. Journals, diaries and poetry of other evacuees were collected and reviewed as well. Transcripts and written narratives were coded according to the subject of their responses, grouped for similarities, and analyzed for themes.

The second study of this research had two distinct phases. Our initial field work was a small-sample, exploratory study of disaster victims reported elsewhere (Horne, D.A. and Sayre, 1996a, 1996b; Horne, D.A., Sayre, and Horne, D.R. 1996; Sayre and Horne, D.A., 1996). The second phase was a survey sent to the largest subset of victims in that same disaster. The self-administered questionnaire used in that survey was based on the tentative findings of the earlier exploratory work. The second disaster involved the total destruction of over 300 homes as well as damage to approximately 60 additional dwellings. A homeowner's association representing the owners of 220 destroyed houses was the target population for the survey. One hundred and thirty surveys were returned from that group and form the basis of this report's findings.

STUDY ONE: PRE-DISASTER BEHAVIOR

The first study was conducted to record behavior under stress prior to the evacuation, and to determine what possessions were rescued by the people who were forced to evacuate their homes on a Saturday morning in mid-October.

The Warning

Typical of many natural disasters, warnings allow persons to take action to mitigate potential impacts to themselves or their property. Official warnings were disseminated by helicopters, loud speakers, police cars, neighbors, and the media. Although warnings have the potential of creating a lengthy period of perceived threat (Lazarus 1966), panic behavior is extremely rare. What is more typical, the literature suggests, is a disbelief of initial warnings (Mileti et al. 1975; Perry, Lindell and Green 1980). It is well documented that individuals tend to understand the hazardous features of their physical environment (Covello 1983); however, the tendency to interpret the impending danger as non-hazardous is common because it
reduces the stress involved with high-risk situations (Kinston & Rosser 1974).

Wolfenstein (1957) provides an extensive, detailed account of disaster stages and their resulting behavior. According to her, the usual reaction to remote threats is that of "being unworried, with more or less the explicit belief that the threat will not materialize or will not affect oneself" (1957:17). Her understanding of such behavior is predicated on a notion that Americans find admitting weakness difficult, so the tendency to deny a threatening danger is culturally reinforced. 

Fire transcripts revealed that more males reflected the disbelief syndrome than females, and females reported higher stress levels. 

Testimony indicated that women, who found the time between the warning and departure very stressful, took the threat more seriously than their male counterparts. Mrs. P. [45] said, "All the women I know had to force their husbands to start evacuating. The men were just curious about the events, not concerned about the consequences." Two men [61, 47] said they never believed their houses would burn down. Another man [61] said his wife made him start packing, and three others [56, 62, 73] said it was their wives who instigated departure. Mr. G. [28] said, "Sure, there was smoke, but I figured I had time for a shower and a shave. When I looked out my bathroom window, the flames had already hit a couple of apartments." Behavior typical of the warning stage is expressed in this woman's [37] declaration: "The kids hid from the helicopters, my husband watched the game on TV, and I packed the car. No one believed me that it was serious."

Wolfenstein also found that people were more likely to acknowledge the threat of danger if they took specific precautionary measures. During the period between the first warnings and departure, males (socialized to solve problems and take control) engaged in a variety of precautionary activities. B. and T. [56, 53] spent several hours watering their roofs. J. [52] said that her husband was on the roof with a bottle of brandy and a shotgun on the lookout for looters. Women (socialized to mother and protect) took precautionary measures like chasing pets or "a lot of dumb things to keep busy, like locking all the doors and closing the windows."

Group reactions to danger are affected by the communal character of the experience, characterizing danger as "an exciting break with everyday routine; a holiday atmosphere" (Wolfenstein 1957:45). The men in our sample had a tendency to view the activity similarly. T. [M29] "was thrilled by the excitement of it all." P. [M35] said: "Everybody on the street was out, talking and speculating. Voices from helicopters were urging us to evacuate, but nobody left, so neither did we." A somewhat altered version of this account was reported by P.'s wife [34], who said, "It was the husbands against the wives...we kept saying, 'Let's go,' and they would stall and just not pay any attention to us." Typical of the more pragmatic female population, J. [F33] reported that while she was checking on neighbors, her kids were on bikes riding around trying to catch a glimpse of the flames.

The Evacuation

During this phase of the disaster, some residents had up to four hours, but others less than ten minutes to pack up their possessions for departure. For our population, diminished time resulted in diminished control over their circumstances. Fiske and Taylor (1984) found that people's reaction to the loss of control that accompanies threat from an outside force is controlled by increased stress and feelings of helplessness. Respondents' testimony indicated that a stressful condition was caused by the anticipation of their loss of possessions and their lack of control over the fire danger. Transcripts reveal that within a period of several hours, many individuals' sense of invulnerability gave way to a terrible apprehension that they were about to suffer
a devastating loss of beloved objects and perhaps life itself.

Possessions: The Selection Process

A crucial part of this evacuation process was packing up possessions for removal from the area. Examining how people responded to time pressure, Payne, Bettrman and Johnson (1988) found that individuals under high time pressure adapted by examining at least some information about all alternatives quickly rather than attempting to examine a limited number of options in more depth. Impacted by stress and confusion, evacuees had to make their choices from a lifetime of acquiring, collecting and receiving. Interview transcripts reveal that the selection criteria were driven by the stress-laden circumstances of the packing-up process.

Transcripts disclosed that males, who felt less stress and were more likely than females to make reason-based decisions, selected items to take depending upon whether or not they could be replaced. Comments like, “We didn’t take things we knew we could buy again [M42],” and “I evacuated by thinking that if I could buy it in the store, I wouldn’t take it [M61].” More male evacuees removed things because they were visible or in the line of sight. One man [63] said he took a whole bunch of cheap watches because they fit in his suitcase, and he grabbed things that were in view at the time. “I walked around the house and made arbitrary decisions about what should go or stay,” he remembered. R. [M31] “took clothes out of the hamper, dirty ones, because they were handy to grab.” In spite of feeling stress and pressure from time, far fewer women made convenience-based decisions, and the ones who did tended to choose items of personal value. Ms. J. [28] confessed that she raced through the house, "grabbing a camera from the desk, pictures that were on the dresser, and a plastic thing with photos from the wall.”

Gender was not a factor when making decisions that emanated from the stress of total confusion. One woman [32] couldn’t decide of what to take so she “chose the fish because they were alive.” J. [M45] said he stood in front of his ties and finally decided the fire could have them all. A college sophomore [M19] remembered his roommate taking everything: “The whole room. Even his sheets. And the answering machine. He went nuts; he just kept running back and forth to his car with all his stuff.”

Both men and women performed “denial packing,” thinking they’d be coming right back: G [F26] remembered thinking, “Surely they jest. Why should I take all my shit out of the house just to split for a few hours?” and C [M36] said he “felt silly packing all the stuff today knowing it would all have to be put back tomorrow.”

In keeping with socialization in our culture (women often select clothes, food and furniture for their families), more women than men had to make selections for others, having to guess what the absent relative would choose for him/herself. T. [F41] said that taking things for other people was a big responsibility: “I thought, what do I take for my husband? What do I save of his life?” Almost every person who had to pack for another said it was the most difficult part of dealing with the fire. M. [F27] said she took her boyfriend’s “Versacci silk shirt because it was new,” but that she had no idea what else of his to take. Only one man [41] recounted his choices for his wife: “Ruth likes her clothes to match, so I got stuff that went together. I thought she’d be mad if I brought the wrong jewelry.”

The Role of Gender in the Possession Selection Process

Using Dittmar’s (1989) meaning-based classification system, we categorized items removed during the evacuation. Objects were arranged as social products by function within the context of the fire to reveal personal significance rather than to
reflect physical attributes. Object classification was based on contextual meaning as expressed by respondents. Five categories emerged from a total of 511 possessions mentioned by respondents: Utility (functional; interim goods), Self-symbolic (self-extenders, symbols of personal identity, position or role, and transitional experience), Affiliation (importance as symbols of the past, others and/or relationships), Lifestyle (items symbolic of ritual, routine, sporting equipment; brand-names—literal extensions of a person’s being) and Asset (objects of economic value; commodities). To illustrate the meaning dimension, the chart below shows how the description ascribed to a watch by its owner was used to determine object classification.

Transcripts were analyzed by sex, revealing significant differences in the type of possessions mentioned. Evidence from feminist theory (Gilligan 1984), sociology (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), and psychology (Dittmar 1989) suggests that differences exist in the “ecology of signs” men and women use to define themselves; their findings were supported by these data. Items are grouped into classes, totaled and shown as percentages of mentions by men and women in Table 3.

Table 3 demonstrates gendered biases for self-referent objects of action (sports, electronics) and for objects of contemplation referring to memories (photographs) and the immediate family similar to those reported in Gilligan, Dittmar, and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton. Dittmar found that utility items (papers, documents, records) were listed by more women as important to their self-definition, here, men listed papers higher among the items selected for the evacuation. Although women mentioned cars as a utility item more often, it may have been because, in many cases, they assumed the role of loading the car for evacuation.

Evacuation anecdotal material corresponds with Kampner’s (1991) study which found that younger and male subjects gave preference to the active, physical, and immediate qualities of possessions, while women and older subjects emphasized symbolic and interpersonal features. Comparisons of evacuation items with studies reporting “favorite” or “important” objects reveal discrepancies which may be attributed to the stress, and may indicate that item determinants were predicated upon factors other than attachment for both men and women.

While pets were not categorized as possessions selected during the evacuation, they were the most mentioned item-set in the transcripts recounting the evacuation experience, and took priority over material possessions. Concern for pets was not gendered, and all of the evacuees who had pets took them—or tried to; many ran off in the confusion. Respondents reported concern for their pets similar to concern for family members, and most devoted valuable pre-evacuation time accounting for pet whereabouts: “We spent most of our time chasing after the animals” (F43). Many animals were lost in the confusion, and many owners reported spending several months after the fire tracking them down.

STUDY TWO:
POST-DISASTER BEHAVIOR

The second study was conducted to determine how victims of a fire who had lost their homes and all of their possessions would buy new things for themselves and refurnish their newly constructed homes. After the trauma of evacuation and eventual confrontation with the reality of being without home and without possessions, disaster victims set out to rebuild their lives through a sequence of reconstruction activities. The exploratory phase mentioned earlier suggested that the purchase process, because of its enormity and time pressures, was quite stressful for many victims.
From the analysis of the exploratory research, we identified the recurrence of five actions that have traditional gender assignment: (1) product selection, (2) product-related expressions of personal identity, (3) shopping, (4) self-definition, and (5) gifting. Believing that male and female behaviors during the stress-induced process of personal reconstruction would reflect gender socialization, we constructed hypotheses to test our beliefs. Likert-like scales were used to measure agreement with various statements and then mean differences between male and female respondents were tested for statistical significance and support or lack thereof for our gender-based assertions.

SURVEY HYPOTHESES

The gender literature is fairly consistent in its presentation of women as intuitive decision makers, tracing the source to mothering, protecting and nurturing in changing environments. Men are socialized to demonstrate the power of abstract reason (Flax 1990), perhaps from their roles as planners and strategists. Our survey posed a variety of questions concerning product purchase decision making during the period where men and women were rebuilding and refurbishing their households. We anticipated that time-pressured product selection technique (intuition vs. cognition) would conform to social roles.

H1: The product selection process of reconstruction will be gendered.

Csikszentmihalyi Rochberg-Halton's (1981) massive study of meaning and possessions found that women were likely to prize possessions that signify relationships, and that men were attached to objects that served a function, such as golf clubs and a music system. Other studies (Belk 1988), and the evacuation anecdotal material presented earlier, have also shown that identity expressed through material possessions is gendered. We expected that women and men, divested of their possessions with associative and utilitarian values, would embue value into their new possessions according to gendered prescriptions.

H2: Product-related expressions of identity will be gendered.

The gendered structure of work in today's society follows traditional patterns—men do paid work and women do housework. But family and household structures are changing, and both women and men do paid work and unpaid domestic work (Wilk and Netting 1984). Although paid and unpaid work is not clearly gendered, there are gendered patterns that indicate women tend to do more unpaid domestic work than men do. Chores completed inside the home without pay constitute use-value work (Lorber 1994:174). Both men and women do work for pay as well as unpaid use-value work for their family; yet women who do paid work are still primarily responsible for housework and child care. This unequal division of domestic work in dual-earner households suggests that income from a full-time job alone does not give wives a status equal to that of their husbands. We extended the notion of use-value work to include shopping, expecting the shopping duties to be gendered.

H3: Shopping will be viewed as unpaid and gendered use-value work.

Traditionally, men have defined themselves through material possessions, while females are more likely to construct their identity through relationship orientations (Dittmar 1989; Kuhn and Wolpe 1978). According to Dittmar, both gender and social-material position act as organizing principles of self-conceptions which are reflected in the meanings attached to personal possessions. Individuals in this sample, reinforced by substantial insurance settlement sums, had an opportunity to act in an unrestrained fashion in their rebuying processes. Since most of the possessions of both genders were lost, we expected that the reacquisition process would not cause women and men to change their criteria for recreating their identities.

H4: The process of identity rebuilding will be gendered.
Research has shown that women are likely to give gifts unconditionally to show their affection (Fisher and Arnold 1990), while men are likely to give expecting reciprocal gifts. Since gift-getting was prevalent among disaster victims, we wondered how each gender would view the process. We expected that women would not suggest giving money as a gift to disaster victims, and to self-gift to a greater extent than men.

**H5: Suggestions for gifting to other disaster victims will be gendered.**

**SURVEY RESULTS**

The data were analyzed using T-tests to ascertain the difference between MALES and FEMALES on the response items of interest. The sample consisted of 130 usable questionnaires from a mailing of 343. Given the turmoil in the respondents' lives as they dealt with rebuilding their homes, recovering from their ordeal and generally bringing order back to their families, this response rate of 38% seems quite acceptable. Non-response biases should not be a problem with this data set. The 130 responses were split between 61 MALES and 69 FEMALES. As noted earlier the age of the entire victim population was somewhat older and more upscale reflecting the community where the disaster occurred.

**H1: Product Selection Process is Gendered**

Four questions were used to measure this hypothesis with the expectation that if the hypothesis were true then MALES would score lower than FEMALES on all the items. The results offer no support for this hypothesis. Three of the four items showed no significant difference and the one that was significant at the .04 level was in the opposite direction: FEMALES scored lower than MALES. Therefore, H1 is rejected.

**H2: Product-related Expressions of Identity are Gendered**

Three questions were used to measure this hypothesis with the expectation that if the hypothesis were true, then MALES would score higher than FEMALES on all three items. The results offer some support for this hypothesis. While two of the three items showed no significant differences, one item was significant at the .02 level in the expected direction. Therefore, H2 is somewhat supported.

**H3: Shopping as Use-value Work is Gendered**

Three questions were used to measure this hypothesis with the expectation that if the hypothesis were true, then MALES would score higher than FEMALES on two of the three items. The results offer strong support for this hypothesis. Only one item did not show significant differences, and the other two items had significant differences at the .00 and .02 level between MALES and FEMALES in the expected directions. Therefore, H3 is strongly supported.

**H4: Identity Rebuilding is Gendered**

Three questions were used to measure this hypothesis with the expectation that if the hypothesis were true, then MALES would score lower than FEMALES on two of the three items. The results offer no support for this hypothesis. While two of the three items showed no significant differences, the one item that was significant at the .03 level was in the opposite direction. Therefore, H4 is rejected.

**H5: Gifting is Gendered**

Five questions were used to measure this hypothesis with the expectation that if the hypothesis were true, then MALES would score higher than FEMALES on three of the five items. The results offer no support for this hypothesis. There were no significant differences between MALES and FEMALES on any item. Therefore, H5 is rejected.

**DISCUSSION**

The conditions surrounding natural disaster presented us with two opportunities to study stress-impacted situations where male
and female behavior was identified and observed. In each situation, subjects' behaviors reflected corresponding levels of stress. By further examining time-intensified behavior in both pre- and post-disaster situations, we began to see patterns emerge that offered answers to our research question: Is gender-based behavior enhanced or diminished under stress from life-threatening situations?

Very different behaviors were reported between men and women prior to the disaster, some reflecting socialized and gendered roles, and others reflecting behavior directly oppositional. During the life-threatening conditions of evacuation, for instance, men, who have historically acted as defender of the home, did not embrace a perception of impending danger. Women, who felt a greater degree of threat, immediately assumed the role of protector-of-the-nest. Males busied themselves with diversionary tasks while women planned and strategized (not a gendered role) in a rational manner to protect their possessions. This study provides numerous examples of male reticence and female anxiety with regard to the safety of the family. Traditional gendered behavior was seen during the packing-up process when males more often based their object selection decisions on visual cues than on personal attachments, as the females did.

During this evacuation phase, stress appeared to have some impact upon gender-based behavior, causing both females and males to "do what they did best in the situation" [F44].

The reconstruction process, however, yielded fewer reports of gendered behavior. Table 2 reviews the results of the hypotheses tested in our post-disaster phase survey.

Although behavior following the disaster tended to reflect fewer traditional gender-role patterns than we found in the life-threatening pre-disaster phase, two of our five hypotheses indicated the presence of differences in behaviors that corresponded to traditional sex roles. Women felt dehumanized by the process of itemizing their belongings for insurance claims that stripped their cherished possessions of all but monetary importance, ignoring their relationship significance (H2). Women, to a greater extent than men, felt their life was one long shopping spree, and they also felt less level-headed than men as they made purchase decisions (H3).

Three of our hypotheses were not supported, indicating the existence of more similarities than differences among the behaviors of men and women in our sample. The survey suggests that individuals acting together, as well as individuals acting alone, exhibited behaviors indicative of both gender psychologies while reconstructing their identities and their households.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The research indicates that the presence of extreme stress suggests a bias toward gender-based behaviors; comfort with gendered responses to the life-threatening situation was expressed in narratives from the first phase. Results of the survey in phase two reveal that, as time passed, gender-based behaviors diminished and Bem's (1974) notion of gender-mixed strategies prevailed.

The survey responses, gathered 11 months after the actual disaster during the latter stages of reconstruction, reflected fewer gendered behaviors than interview testimony from the first study. As pressure and stress were reduced over time, men tended to put aside their traditional paid-work orientation to participate in the home furnishing process (unpaid work), and women often approached shopping (unpaid work) from a logical paid-work perspective. Feeling robbed of their pasts, victims' gender roles varied from traditional socialized behavior: women chose to derive their identity from possessions as well as relationships, and men looked to their families as well as their jobs or their "stuff" for self-definition.
LIMITATIONS

As with most field studies, our two disaster samples may not be indicative of other disaster populations. Both data samples were racially homogenous, geographically isolated, and skewed upward in both age and income. While the age variable was not part of the second study, survey data reported here were gathered primarily from adult homeowners between 40 and 70 years of age to reduce the effect of age-based bias. And although age was a factor in the first study, those results are not reported here for lack of space and relevance.

Although reflective accounts are subject to the problems of selective perception and psychological minimization of post-traumatic stress, these interviews from the first study were gathered as soon after the evacuation as was possible; and because of the extraordinary nature of the event, most respondents recorded their thoughts in journals and diaries which were used to stimulate recall. Survey data may not be generalizable to the entire sample, as those who completed the survey (130 out of 343) may reflect response biases.

Firestorm stress may not be the same as stress caused by other natural disasters, although the disaster literature indicates that stress caused by earthquakes, floods and hurricanes corresponds to the presence of a warning stage, duration and magnitude of the catastrophic event, and the amount of loss and destruction. The study was not controlled for respondents' past experience with chaotic occurrences, and the results provide indications rather than conclusive evidence of stress-related gendered behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

By observing the differences between the behavior of men and women devastated by disaster, and comparing the stress levels present in each study with the respondent reports, we found that there was a minor relationship between stress levels and traditional sex-role behavior. During a life-threatening situation, behavior seemed to reflect socialized behaviors more often than not. As stress diminished, people were more apt to adopt gender-blended behaviors. Similar to lifestyle trends that promote task and role sharing for 90s couples, men and women in our survey sample approached the overwhelming task of rebuilding from what we call a "gender-integrated" rather than a gender-specific perspective.

Perhaps, as post-modernists suggest, we have entered a time where the self is de-centered from the bombardment of fragmented media signs and images that erode our sense of gender. For most of American society, though, gender seems to mean difference. In the social construction of gender, even if men and women perform the same tasks, the social institution of gender insists that what people do is perceived as different. And while our research suggests that stress reduction tends to blur gendered behavior distinctions, we wonder what victims' gender roles will be when their homes are rebuilt and their lives are back to normal—when disaster-related stress has been removed as a variable.

NOTE

1. Gender is used here in its more everyday sense to refer to a social distinction between masculine and feminine. In this sense, it can be distinguished from the term sex, which relates to the biological and by and large binary distinction between male and female (Graddol and Swann 1989:7).

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Table 1
Meaning Classification System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description/Meaning</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;So I could keep appointments&quot;</td>
<td>Utility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;My school crest on it&quot;</td>
<td>Self-symbolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It was my grandmother's&quot;</td>
<td>Affiliation/Past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;From Tiffany's...for the opera&quot;</td>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Worth forty thou&quot;</td>
<td>Asset</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Outcome of Survey Hypotheses Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Differences Category</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Gendered Product Selection</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Gendered Product/Identity</td>
<td>Somewhat Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Gendered Shopping</td>
<td>Strongly Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Gendered Self-definition</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Gendered Gifting</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Total Mentions</td>
<td>% Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets (dog, cat, bird, fish)</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art (artifact, painting, handicrafts)</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to others (wife, husband, son, daughter)</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation (car/bike)</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports (skis, golf clubs, guns)</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics (VCR, camera, computer)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers, documents, files, records</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos, albums, pictures</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>