

**MEDIA EDUCATION  
FOUNDATION  
STUDY GUIDE**

**Michael Kimmel on Gender**

Mars, Venus or Planet Earth?  
Women and Men in a New Millennium

Study Guide by Jason Young

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## NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds.

**Key Points** provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

**Questions for Discussion & Writing** encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and serve to guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for "free-writing" or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

**Assignments** encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Again and again, we've been told that men and women are engaged in a "battle of the sexes," that the two genders are so differently wired and so foreign to each other that they may as well come from different planets. Bestselling author Michael Kimmel turns this idea on its head. In this wide-ranging lecture, Kimmel moves beyond the popular inter-planetary notion that "men are from Mars and women are from Venus" and advances a decidedly more earth-bound and inter-connected view of the things men and women have in common. In the process, he provides an introduction to gender politics and gender theory that's as intellectually informative as it is inspiring.

## PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. How would you define gender? What's the difference between someone's gender and someone's sex? What specific messages about gender did you grow up with? Do you think these messages grew solely out of physical characteristics and differences assigned at birth? Or do you think there was also a cultural and societal dimension at work – that what you were taught about what it means to be a man or a woman, a girl or a boy, was also filtered through cultural beliefs and attitudes and traditions? And if so, where do you think these non-biological ideals came from?
2. Do you believe the United States is a sexist society? Why or why not? How would you define sexism, anyway? Is it a societal phenomenon? An institutional phenomenon? A personal, individual mindset? Maybe a combination of all of these things?
3. What is privilege? Is there such a thing as gender privilege? If so, who has it? Who doesn't? Where does it come from? Is there a history of gender privilege in this country? How can people with privilege affect society in ways that people without privilege cannot?
4. Name some examples where men receive certain advantages – either unconsciously or consciously – that women do not receive. Are these examples of male privilege institutional or interpersonal?
5. What does the phrase “battle of the sexes” mean to you? How about “men are from Mars and women are from Venus”? Do you agree with the implications of these phrases? Why or why not?

## KEY POINTS

- John Gray’s 1992 book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* argues that men and women are so fundamentally different that they might as well be from different planets. In this lecture, Michael Kimmel argues that, in behavior and social science, women and men are far more similar than they are different.
- In November 1991, Kimmel wrote an article for his local newspaper called “Clarence and Us” – an op-ed piece about sexual harassment, inspired by Anita Hill’s testimony at Clarence Thomas’ Senate confirmation hearings.
- In the spring of 1992, Kimmel began lecturing about issues of sex and gender.
- A pair of studies conducted 35 years apart, in 1970 and 2005, asked 3,000 American women if they *agreed* with a series of identical statements about men. Here are the comparative results:

	<b>1970</b>	<b>2005</b>
“Men are basically kind and considerate.”	65%	44%
“Men’s egos require that they put women down.”	41%	58%
“All a man really wants from a date is to go to bed.”	44%	71%
“All a man is really interested in is his career, not his family.”	39%	56%

- Kimmel doesn’t believe this data suggests that men have gotten worse over the years. Instead, he believes it reflects women’s increasing expectations of men.
- Women’s lives have changed drastically over the past 40 years:
  - Women made gender visible
  - Women entered the workplace, the largest transformation of the labor force in history
  - Women learned to balance work and family
  - Women now feel entitled to their own sexual pleasure
- According to Alfred Kinsey’s 1954 study on sexual behavior in the human female, 41% of American women over the age of 25 had masturbated. In 1996, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago found that 90% of American women had masturbated.
- According to Kinsey’s 1948 study on sexual behavior in the human male, 96% of American men had masturbated. In 1996, the Social Organization of Sexuality found that 97% of American men had masturbated.
- In 1975, sociologist Lillian Ruben did a study of working class women in the San Francisco Bay area and found that 40% of women faked an orgasm. In 1995, Ruben did the same study in the same neighborhood and found that only 10% of women have ever faked an orgasm.
- Men’s lives have also changed over the past 40 years:
  - There are only three all-male colleges left in America
  - There is no more all-male military
  - There are virtually no jobs left where men have only male colleagues and bosses

- College-age men today subscribe to the same ideology of masculinity as previous generations:
  - A man never does anything that even remotely hints of femininity
  - A man is measured by his wealth, power, and status
  - A man is reliable in a crisis
  - A man is daring and aggressive
- Most men don't recognize that gender is equally important to both men and women because privilege is often invisible to those who have it. People with privilege tend to see the discrimination, not the privilege. For example, when white people hear the word "race," they often think it pertains to people of color and not to themselves.
- "That's so gay" is the most common putdown in American middle schools and high schools. While the phrase is clearly homophobic, Kimmel argues that it's often less about sexual orientation than about gender – meant to suggest that a guy isn't masculine enough.
- When asked by MTV's Kurt Loder about his use of the word "faggot," Eminem said, "The lowest degrading thing that you can say to a man is to call him a faggot and try to take away his manhood. Call him a sissy, call him a punk. 'Faggot' to me doesn't mean necessarily gay people. 'Faggot' to me just means taking away your manhood."
- Homophobia must be confronted, and both masculinity and privilege must be made visible – particularly to boys and younger men.
- Without confronting men's sense of entitlement, Kimmel argues that we'll never understand why so many men resist gender equality.
- There are currently three reforms that go under the umbrella of "family-friendly workplaces": on-site childcare, flexible working hours, and parental leave. However, they are thought of as women's issues and not parents' issues – and this affects how they get dealt with.
- Women won't get family-friendly workplaces unless men start supporting them.
- The United States is one of only five countries in the world that does not offer paid parental leave to anyone. The other countries are Swaziland, Lesotho, Surinam, and Papua New Guinea.
- Americans have one of two models of marriage in their heads: the passion-romance model or the friendship-partnership model. The latter model thrives because it's more egalitarian.
- When men share housework and childcare, their kids do better in school and are absent less. They're less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, to see psychologists, or to be medicated.
- When men share housework and childcare, their wives are happier and healthier. They're less likely to see a therapist or take prescription medication.
- When men share housework and childcare, they are less likely to smoke, drink, and take drugs. They are less likely to go to therapists and to be diagnosed with depression. They also have sex more.
- Two-thirds of American high school students receive abstinence-only sex education.
- 25% of virginity pledges in colleges and universities believe that oral sex does not violate their abstinence pledge, and 10% believe that anal sex does not.

- For some men, the phrase “safe sex” is an oxymoron that really means, “Stop having sex like men.”
- Unless women feel completely safe, they cannot claim their own sexual agency.
- Women are taught how to reduce their own risk of sexual assault. However, Kimmel believes men need to be taught as well. He argues that men could end rape in this country today if they made different choices with their bodies.

## POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What are the similarities between women and men? What are the differences? Are these differences grounded in reality, or in perception and expectations? Do you believe women and men are more similar or more different?
2. Why do you think women’s responses to the same statements about men changed from 1970 to 2005? Have men gotten worse? Why or why not?
3. How have American women’s lives changed in the past 40 years or so? How have men’s lives changed? Do you believe these changes have helped or hurt society?
4. According to Kimmel, why are gender issues equally important to both women and men?
5. Aside from male privilege, what other types of privilege can you think of? How can these other types of privilege intersect with male privilege? Who benefits from these forms of privilege? Who does not?
6. What does the phrase “that’s so gay” mean to you? How about the word “faggot”? When are these words used to degrade sexual orientation? When are they used to degrade a gender? Can you think of other phrases or words that function the same way?
7. According to the lecture, why should men share housework and childcare? Are there any other reasons why you think men should share these familial duties?
8. Sarah Palin, the 2008 Vice Presidential candidate, preaches abstinence before marriage, even though her 17-year-old daughter became pregnant. Does this affect your view of abstinence-only education? Do you think abstinence-only sex education is the best way to teach teens about sex? Why or why not?
9. How were you taught about sex? From a parent or guardian? From your school? From media? From all of these places? What did you learn about sex in school? Were contraceptives handed out? Do you think your sex education was effective? How could it have been improved? If you had to educate your child about sex today, how would you do it?
10. What can girls and women do to prevent male sexual violence against women? What can boys and men do? Are there things that men can do more effectively on this front than women? Why or why not? Do you think our cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity – our shared ideas about what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman – play into the epidemic of men’s violence against women? Explain.

## ASSIGNMENTS

1. Read selections of John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. Then write a paper about one of these two concepts from the book: a) the point system, or b) "cave and wave." Be sure to summarize what Gray means, then give your own take on what he says.
2. Research the controversy surrounding Clarence Thomas' Supreme Court nomination. Then write a paper about how Anita Hill's allegations of sexual harassment helped raise public awareness about issues of gender and power.
3. Research some of the leading theories of interpersonal communication, especially as they relate to how men and women communicate. Then watch the 1989 film *When Harry Met Sally*. Using what you learned in your research about interpersonal communication, and what you learned in Michael Kimmel's lecture about gender, write a paper about what you think *When Harry Met Sally* is saying about women, men, and heterosexual relationships. Do you agree with these messages? Do you think Kimmel would? Why or why not? Be specific!
4. Research the role of women in U.S. history, going all the way back to the colonial era. Write a paper about how the role of women has changed, how it has stayed the same, how you feel it might develop (or not) in the future, and how all of this has affected – or stands to affect – men. Be sure to link your findings, wherever possible, to insights from Kimmel's lecture – especially his ideas about how women's changing roles have affected men's sense of themselves.
5. Look into Alfred Kinsey's research on human sexuality. Then write a paper about how his work influenced social and cultural values in the United States. Use Kimmel's lecture to bolster your own analysis.
6. Read Jackson Katz's "8 Reasons Eminem's Popularity is a Disaster for Women":  
<http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/JacksonKatzOnEminem.pdf>.  
 Then write a response paper exploring your thoughts on Eminem as a cultural icon. Be sure, first, to summarize Katz's main points in your own words.
7. Watch these two sex education videos from the 1950s:  
<http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/ArchivalSexEducationVideos.zip>.  
 Write up your reactions to the videos, and be sure to address the following: What attitudes do these videos seem to have toward their subject matter? What values or assumptions are embedded in their presentations? How effective do you think these videos were in the 1950s? Could you educate children about sex using the messages featured in these videos today? Why or why not? How would you educate children about sex today?
8. Interview men on campus about their relationships with women and what their expectations are in these relationships. Then interview women about their relationships with men. Summarize these interviews, and write up a comparison of the male and female responses in your report. Did the people you interviewed seem satisfied with their relationships? Did you notice anything that relates to the arguments advanced in Michael Kimmel's lecture?