2.1: Introduction- Binary Systems

Black and white. Masculine and feminine. Rich and poor. Straight and gay. Able-bodied and disabled. **Binaries** are social constructs composed of two parts that are framed as absolute and unchanging opposites. **Binary systems** reflect the integration of these oppositional ideas into our culture. This results in an exaggeration of differences between social groups until they seem to have nothing in common. An example of this is the phrase “men are from Mars, women are from Venus.” Ideas of men and women being complete opposites invite simplistic comparisons that rely on stereotypes: men are practical, women are emotional; men are strong, women are weak; men lead, women support. Binary notions mask the complicated realities and variety in the realm of social identity. They also erase the existence of individuals, such as multiracial or mixed-race people and people with non-binary gender identities, who may identify with neither of the assumed categories or with multiple categories. We know very well that men have emotions and that women have physical strength, but a binary perspective of gender prefigures men and women to have nothing in common. They are defined against each other; men are defined, in part, as “not women” and women as “not men.” Thus, our understandings of men are influenced by our understandings of women. Rather than seeing aspects of identity like race, gender, class, ability, and sexuality as containing only two dichotomous, opposing categories, conceptualizing multiple various identities allows us to examine how men and women, Black and white, etc., may not be so completely different after all, and how varied and complex identities and lives can be.