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# The (Gender) Games We Play

When we recognize the influence of gender stereotypes, we can finally move past them and develop our own sense of acceptance.

by Brad Jensen

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*“Most of us formed many of our social expectations through television and other media.”*

Imitation ... it's often said to be the sincerest form of flattery. It's how we begin our lives, watching and learning from those around us. We observe our parents and siblings, soaking in the way they make their way through their world. And we follow suit.

As we get a little older, our circle becomes a little bigger. With every interaction, our psyche is learning how to function in society as part of our journey to becoming autonomous, self-sufficient adults. We observe people in our immediate surroundings and see how they treat, and are treated by, others. All of this helps to create our expectations of social behaviors. It also helps to cement certain stereotypes, including those related to gender. Those stereotypes, if we aren't careful, can serve to limit our quest for autonomy and the happiness that comes with it.

### The Impact of Gender Stereotypes

At their core, gender stereotypes consist of shared beliefs about the characteristics and attributes associated with each sex. Women are commonly believed to have more communal, nurturing qualities, like expressiveness and kindness. Men are more often associated with traits like independence and aggressiveness. The trouble is, these stereotypes often describe not how men and women truly *are*, but how they *should be* in the minds of many people.

If children move through their formative years with specific "traditional" gender roles displayed in several aspects of their lives, a girl would probably not think to become a scientist, or a boy a nurse. Social proof bears this out. A recent study at Facebook demonstrates the importance of parental modeling on the choice of jobs; sons tend to follow their fathers' career choices, while daughters were far more likely to follow their mothers'. (Adamic and Filiz, 2016)

For example, the son with a father in the military is five times more likely to enter the armed forces. When fathers work in farming, fishing or forestry, their sons are 7.6 times more likely to enter the same profession. Even more telling, 8.5 percent of daughters with moms in nursing chose to follow that career path — at a frequency 3.75 times higher than other girls their age.

Parents aren't, of course, the only influence. Most of us formed many of our social expectations through television and other media. A dysfunctional relationship portrayed in a comedic light, such as a sitcom where the mom is a whining nag and the dad is an aggressive bully, can have a profound effect on a young mind that carries into adulthood. Researchers who study these things believe it's because children have a hard time realizing that the stereotype is exaggerated for effect rather than a reflection of real life. (Dietz, 1991)

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### Autonomy vs. Conformity

As we age, the gender roles we've assimilated — from our own families, our social circle, and the media — play a role building our social circle in the hopes of finding validation and approval.

For example, a young woman may learn that she finds more social success when she hides her intelligence from men to whom she's attracted. It's a perfect storm, because it plays just as strongly into the other side of the gender coin — the one in which men seek satisfaction and acceptance by being the dominant ones, surrounded by more submissive personalities. Two subjectively unfavorable traits combine to produce short-term positive (though near-sighted) results for both players.

It happens in our wider circle, too. A working mom may succumb to pressure to join the PTO at school; she'll be more accepted by her social peers even though it means giving up time to work on her advanced degree. A "career" man might never admit his dream of quitting the corporate world to explore his passion as an artist, afraid of what it might do to his social standing at the golf club.

When gender stereotypes compel us to act like this, it's nearly impossible to gain the autonomy we seek. Instead, we end up assuming expected roles to make others happy rather than being true to ourselves. At best, this leads to a somewhat shallow existence where we miss our best chance for living with passion. In the extreme, situations like this can even result in depression or addiction. (Steger and Kashdan, 2009)



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*“Gender roles; they’re engrained in everything we do  
— that’s the dangerous part.”*

assume it’s MY success that affords us the opportunity to live where we do and play like we do. Then they find out it’s the other way around. We get a kick out of seeing their brains trying to process this.

For many couples, this constant social judgement would be enormously difficult. Maybe the man would feel the need to “explain” the situation, or the woman might be reluctant to admit her financial status for fear of being seen as less feminine. For us, we are keenly aware that our acceptance by others isn’t as important as it is to some, because we have a relationship that provides the acceptance we each seek. Getting to this point has been a journey, but certainly a rewarding one. We’re each other’s biggest fan.

We credit our success to a commitment to good communication and a strong sense of humor. We try not to take ourselves too seriously. At the same time, our marriage is not the first one for either of us, so we feel like we have everything at stake, everything to lose. With that as the basis, we work hard to make sure we’re 100 percent unified.

Society’s expectations can be heavy. Overcoming them — moving on from simply mimicking what we observe around us to reaching our potential as autonomous creatures — takes awareness and it takes work.

It’s only when we learn to develop ourselves *in spite of* what society says, rather than because of it, that we truly embrace that deepest acceptance of our own lives. ♦

**Sources:**

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**The Personal Twist**

Growing up, all the careers that interested me were on the humanities side of the house. Teaching, designing, arts, writing — these were all areas in which I had a great deal of interest, and a fair amount of aptitude, even though they are often considered more “female” careers. I didn’t care; this was where my passion moved me.

I was not interested in any of the traditionally “male” careers: programming, systems architecture, technical project management. It’s these careers (and ones related to them — leadership, management, entrepreneurship, sales, etc.) that are financially rewarded and highly regarded today.

In a delightful and often amusing twist, my wife and I embody the opposite of the traditional male/female career stereotypes. She’s a highly

successful technical manager who’s worked for a Fortune 100 company for more than a decade, and I work as a freelance writer from my home office. We’re both smart and accomplished at what we do. My wife, however, makes three times what I make.

This might sound like a recipe for disaster. Certainly, for many, it would be. I think a large part of the challenge for many couples is handling the inevitable social judgement that happens when traditional roles are thrown awry. Flipped gender expectations are most noticeable in situations where the norms are entrenched, like in a country club setting. We both love to golf and do enough of it that joining a club made financial sense for us. We meet a lot of new people out on the links, and they usually

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