

Culture, Rules and Roles

We all came into this world at birth, kicking and screaming and essentially the same. Then somewhere between birth and puberty we each evolved into the essence of male and female. Although there are some biological determinations of gender, we now know that the role of masculinity and femininity is learned through social modeling within the family system and general societal expectations.

These expectations begin to evolve through socialization during the educational process, and continues throughout the early years of life. This subculture based on gender which is created through unwritten rules about sex and social roles make conversation between the sexes cross cultural, states Tannen (1987) "Culture is simply a network of patterns gleaned from past experience, and women and men have different past experiences. From the time they were born, they were treated differently, talked to differently, and they talk differently as a result."

A cultural blueprint began to emerge, writes Brannon in *The Male Experience*, as the female sex role in the late 1960's and early 1970's..." a few feminist writers began to wonder if there might also be a male sex role, a cultural blue print of what men were supposed to think, feel, and do...feminist had already discovered what was male by simple contrast with what was female."

The aftereffect was, "If women were 'passive', men must be 'aggressive'. If women lacked confidence, men must be confident, ext.". As we progressed these social roles they patterns of behavior became more defined in the form of culturally prescribed dos and don'ts declares Rasmussen-Scarborough:

- Men are affirmed for standing tall, detaching and becoming strong.
- Women are affirmed for getting involved, carrying the emotional baggage of others.
- The cultural emphasis for males is to succeed.
- The cultural emphasis for females is to look good.
- Men, as boys, play games that emphasize competition, winning, conquering, and being the best.
- Women, as girls, play games that imitate adulthood, house, babies, dolls, grown-up.
- Men's roles are seen as active, to know the answers and lead.
- Women's roles are seen as passive, to ask and to follow.
- The underlying mandate for males is 'don't feel'.
- The underlying mandate for women is 'don't think'.
- Men are accorded identity as a birthright.
- Women secure identity through relationships.

Over the years, we have seen and responded to evolving patterns through the feminist movement, consciousness raising, and the media. However, we remain a fundamentally homophobic society which penalizes males for dependent or unmasculine behavior. Brannon further suggests that social roles teach men to “avoid everything feminine, mannerisms, interest, traits, pursuits...(from) the color of their clothes to the vocabulary they use...(from) the food they consume to the hobbies they enjoy.”

Although patterns are becoming somewhat looser, allowing more flexibility, the average man will lean closer towards gender appropriate hobbies (karate, cars and football) rather than one that is considered feminine (needlepoint, knitting and sewing). Our society reinforces those stereotypes by disallowing men emotional openness and vulnerability, considered a female trait while encouraging the preferred masculine trait of self-control. When men display anger, contempt or displeasure he is being a man, but any emotional suggestions of fear, sadness, depression or love is considered unmasculine and off limits.

Social roles are not inherently good or bad. They are learned behaviors and anything that is learned can be unlearned and relearned. Social roles stand in the way of personal development when it discourages the choice between characteristics which are seen as masculine or feminine. These roles get in the way when men and women attempt to interact and get stuck in nonproductive vacillation between who we were taught to be and how we communicate who we are at the very depths of our being.

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References & Notes

1. Brannon, Robert, “Dimensions of the Male Sex Role”, *The Male Experience*.
2. Many thanks to Charla Rasmussen-Scarborough, MS, CADC for article resources.
3. Tannen, Deborah, PhD., *That’s Not What I Meant!* Ballantine Books, New York, 1986.
4. Tannen, Deborah, William Morrow and Company, Inc., New York, 1990.