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# The Mechanics of Gender Perception

## Doing Your Gender Homework

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**T**his past month I had the pleasure of attending two events that were both enjoyable and educational experiences for me. First of all, I was invited to speak to a

group of professionals at a conference on language, communication, and gender in Reno, Nevada U.S.A. Secondly, I attended the 16th annual Fantasia Fair in Provincetown, Massachusetts U.S.A. Fantasia Fair is an annual event sponsored by the Human Outreach Institute at which people explore and hopefully learn more about their inner gender desires.

These two events were very different in nature but both had a similar impact on me. At each, I met a number of people who were striving to learn more about issues pertaining to "gender". This was the thread that seemed to tie both events together and this I feel is the issue that we as individuals and collectively are trying to resolve.

***... the key is to study others, to emulate at times and to emanate a level of security in who one is and how one wants others to perceive them.***

The professionals in Reno were all highly educated department heads and professors at various universities. One of the purposes of this conference was to identify how "gender" impacts us as a society. The feeling seemed to be that gender, whether it be implied or unquestionably stated, carries with it stereotypical connotations. It was also stated that gender and the social image that accompanies it creates a caste system within which we live.

Several times during the presentations it was stated that the first thing which unconsciously occurs when two individuals make contact in society is an establishment on the other's gender. This in turn lays the ground work for how that other person is to be dealt with.

In other words, if the person is of the same gender as ourselves we relate one way and if that person is the opposite gender we then act accordingly. It was stated that gender establishment is "the" crucial factor in all social interactions. I would agree with this.

From personal experience, I now know that almost all personal interactions are governed by gender influenced perceptions. The underlying notion of "one of us" or "one of them" carries much more weight than we would like to admit, and until this choice is made, interaction in society tends to stall.

There are cases when gender mis-identify is acceptable. Fantasia Fair is one of these places. At this event persons from all over the world are free to explore their "gender of desire" and to interact with society in general while exploring this adopted gender. During this event the town and it's visitors are geared up to play what I would call "gender games". It's said that everyone associated with the "fair" gets "read" (or misread). But this is the nature of this event and all present expect it unlike society in general.

Gender perception is a multi-faceted process. All our senses are put into service when a person's gender is being decided and our perception of another person's gender is usually established very quickly. Should there be any indecision, this identification process preoccupies us until some decision can be attained. In addition, our perception of another's gender, once established, is not easily changed.

Should initial perception prove wrong, several alternatives might result. These alternatives range from a simple reprogramming of how to relate to this other person to outright embarrassment and even hostility.

People do not like to look ridiculous and if the mis-perception of another person's gender has caused seemingly open public embarrassment, hostility toward that individual may follow. In addition, should an individual be insecure with respect to their own role in society or be so rigorously programmed that any gender variations are taboo, they will probably not be able to accept someone projecting mixed gender signals. In these cases an "I'm better than you" or a "you're sick" reaction may result.

What are the gender signals? How do we perceive another person's gender? Also, for us in the "gender community", how do we stack the deck in favour of the gender we perceive ourselves to be. The answers are not easy.

As I previously stated, gender perception is a multifaceted process which we learn very early in life. Even infants are capable of gender identification at an early age. Within the first few months of life, a child can distinguish between strange men and women and will act accordingly.

Gender perception begins with the processing of general sensory signals such as appearance, speech and speech content, scent, mannerisms, etc. All of these signals are collected until a template is sufficiently filled. This I call the "gender perception template".

The template is made up of many sensory inputs or cues, some cues are obvious in nature and others very subtle but none the less important. These cues each have two sides, i.e. a masculine and a feminine side. Some would argue that there is a third side (androgyny) but I would argue that this third possibility is only that a specific cue is missing from the template.

An individual has been identified as belonging to one gender or the other when the individual doing the identification has filled in the template to the point where the scales tip to either the masculine or feminine side and momentarily reach one end of the scale. I feel the key here is that once the scale momentarily reaches an end point, the decision making process is over. This new individual has been analysed enough for the unconscious brain to end the analysis and other thought processes take precedence.

Other gender related inputs will be processed but these are not used to establish this person's gender, only to reaffirm it or to be placed in a list of things that are used to establish that person's credibility or one's comfort level with this individual. Therefore, once gender is established other gender related traits are processed differently.

For those who desire to portray a gender other than that which they were initially raised, i.e. cross-dressers or transsexuals, and to succeed in being accepted as the gender of choice, a working knowledge of this process and the way to tilt it in their favour is a necessity. For many the deck is heavily stacked against them. Such things as physical stature, vocal patterns, even general appearance within the context of the interaction, i.e. being there at all, may be formidable obstacles to overcome. Combine these items with such subtle but immediate giveaways as body language, how one occupies space or a tendency to over compensate, and the war will be lost in milliseconds.

Yes, the gender identification process is usually over before we know it.

Can physical characteristics be overcome? Can any tilting occur with respect to obvious physical handicaps? The answer, I feel to a large degree is yes. How then can a 6ft. 2in. M.T.F. or a 5ft. F.T.M. transsexual with a burgeoning feminine rear ever hope to be accepted as the gender of their choice? The answer to most physical handicaps can be found in studying others with the same problem who are decidedly of the gender of choice yet exhibit that same features.

With little exception, I feel that there is no single feature which may be considered as a gender handicap that is not currently present in many persons in the gender of desire.

For example, There are many very tall women that are perceived as nothing more than tall women. Likewise, there are many short men with large rear ends who are very much accepted as men. Also, while a deep vocal pitch is normally a decidedly male characteristic, there are many notable actresses and female singers with very deep voices. The list goes on and on.

The secret is to seek out individuals who have characteristics which would normally be considered a feature of those of the opposite gender and study them to learn why they are accepted in spite of these handicaps. Study all the other gender related items (most will not be physical characteristics) which comprise these person's total image. When taken as a whole, these other characteristics tilt the scales in the opposite direction.

The key, therefore is to provide enough gender cues to cause the "gender perception template" to tilt momentarily while minimizing things that seem to contradict that initial impression.

The process of seeking out individuals to follow as examples of how to overcome gender handicaps I call doing one's gender homework.

Gender homework is not just saying I know what I feel this should be, gender homework is studying numbers of persons in a public environment such as a shopping mall, university campus or any other public place to see how others do it.

Probably one of the worst mistakes a transgendered person can make is to assume that they know how it's done or how to appear as a person of the opposite gender. Worse yet, they merely try to achieve what they have internally conjured up as the ideal man or woman and run with it. Wrong!

Although a topic for an article by itself, something also has to be said for establishing a comfort level with individuals with which interaction occurs. One should not create an atmosphere of tenseness or act uncomfortable. This can cause people to more closely scrutinize an individual in question and possibly open the door uncovering "gender faults" that initially would go unnoticed.

Usually this "comfort level" in the gender of choice comes only with experience and much practice. There will undoubtedly be many pitfalls and uncomfortable situations along the way but the only way to attain the desired comfort level is to keep at it.

In conclusion I would like to reiterate that the key is to study others, to emulate at times and to emanate a level of security in who one is and how one wants others to perceive them. If this process is followed, and the lessons learned are taken to heart, they will become automatic and gender perception in the gender of choice will be attained. GO FOR IT!

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