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Why Androgyny is Hell in America

By Diana Lynn Wuchich

Growing up, there was little difference between the way my brother and I acted. We both had dolls and stuffed animals; we both played with matchbox cars and Tonka trucks. My parents would watch as we built tiny terrariums, gently placing little ants inside so that we could feed them and watch them move around. My parents also stood wordlessly by and watched as my brother and I systematically tortured each ant to death. We were allowed to burp and to eat with our fingers at home, but were expected to use our best manners in public. Everyone thought us both to be quiet, co-operative, kind, and polite. Little did they know that we beat each other up constantly. Neither of us had any chores, and we were both as stubborn as can be. As little children under our parents’ roof, we felt happy and free. As the school years came and went, though, we both began to feel uncomfortable and uneasy. Our teachers and peers were trying to fit us into roles in which we did not belong— the roles of femininity and masculinity.

Judging from our wide repertoire of talents, I would have to say that my brother and I were raised to be androgynous. Androgyny can be described as a condition in which the impulses and characteristics of the genders are not specifically defined. The androgynous person, therefore, would possess both the stereotypically valued masculine and feminine characteristics, and be able to use them interchangeably (Richmond-Abbot, 1992:10-11; Doyle, 1989: 94). However, the whole concept of androgyny is cloudy at best. To what degree a person must be masculine and feminine to be androgynous (as opposed to undifferentiated) is uncertain. Most experts agree, though, that the androgynous person shows a wide range of behavior, such as aggression, warmth, shyness, dominance, etc., creating a flexible (if not unpredictable) person.

It is the unpredictability of an androgynous person that makes society uneasy. Our culture, as well as most others, has certain expectations for each sex. These expectations are called gender roles (Richmond-Abbot, 1992: 5-13). Gender roles are expressed through generalizations, or stereotypes, of what traits each gender should possess and what behaviors each sex should enact. Gender roles and stereotypes are used to keep the society running smoothly. When a child is born, the society has a set role for it, and need not worry too much about the infant’s personal disposition (Doyle, 1989: 9). Thus, the males

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1 This paper was originally written for Prof. Arlene Eskilson's Sociology 280—Sociology of Gender.
of a culture know how to act and what is expected of them, and the society knows how to
treat the males. Likewise, the females of a culture know how to act and what is expected of
them, and the society knows how to treat the females. Occasionally, a member of one sex
will choose to repeatedly act like the other sex. When this happens in America, the
person is generally (after attempts to correct the person’s behavior) cast into the other sex’s
gender role. Thus, a gender role really need not be based on biological sex. It is more of a
behavioral concept. A person can adopt either a masculine role or a feminine role, regard-
less of whether or not they are a man or a woman. Thus, the so-called “Tom-boy” could
work in the factory, but would be treated with every bit of the roughness that the men get
treated with. Also, the “sissy” could cry, but would not be sent to the boardroom to argue
on an important and controversial case.

Marie Richmond-Abbott (1992: 12-13) claims that the gender role stereotypes
exist in order to maintain the balance of power that exists in our society. Since males are
dominant in our society, they have the power to control the socializing institutions, such as
the economy, the family, the education system, the church, etc. As a result, masculine
traits become those which lead to success (Richmond-Abbott, 1992: 5), and feminine traits
become those which lead to submission. When people do not follow their masculine or
feminine roles— when they start mixing and matching traits— the balance of power is
upset, and social upheaval begins.

Since most experts agree that gender identity is essential to one’s definition of self
(Doyle, 1989: 81), what happens to the androgynous person who has no real gender
identity? In a social vacuum, I believe this person would be happy. However, when this
person tries to relate to others, he or she is faced with the shocking discovery that he/she
cannot be categorized as anything. Also, the society goes through shock as the person fails
to behave in the rigidly predictable manner he or she is supposed to. The person is in an
American socio-status limbo.

To me, being a female was biological— my body was different, big deal. Doyle
(1989: 3) explains that gender identity is formed by age four, and that once it is formed,
very little can change it. By age four, I had no gender identity. Nothing I did was based on
the fact that I wanted to be masculine or I wanted to be feminine. As time went by, life
got tougher. I wasn’t allowed into the big playgroups of males, and the females annoyed
me. Thus, I usually only had one or two friends at a time— one female and/or one male—
who I would play with. I was never popular, for I was too unemotional and aggressive for
the females, yet too nice and quiet for the males. Neither girl nor Tom-boy, I really do not
think the children in my school knew how to relate to me.

High school was not much better. Boys who you beat on tests and who you play
in-your-face basketball with do not ask you out. Boys get confused when you dress sexy, yet do not act like the stereotypical cuddle-bunny. The Tom-boys could always find dates, for they hung around with many guys and got to know them well. Since the boys did not know what to make of me, they basically left me alone. Working in a warehouse was also strange. A great physical laborer, I would get comments like “If you keep doing that, you won’t be able to have children,” but also was made manager. My employers, it seemed, could not decide if I was masculine or feminine either.

My brother did not have it any easier. His bouts of tears made his peers call him a sissy, but his violent temper made them eat their words. He was too dry and logical to hang out with the females, but was too kind and polite to hang out with the males. His girlfriends were surprised with both his over-protectiveness and his dependent clinging. He confounded everyone.

In comparing my two roommates, my dad once said, “Heather is a nice girl—a real decent human being, and Alice is Alice.” Of course, I knew what he meant. Heather is feminine and Alice is androgynous. Alice can’t be classified. In a vain attempt to rationalize androgyny, my younger sister has dubbed me “He-Woman” (as opposed to He-Man), because I can be both tough and tender. She likewise called one of my boyfriends “Feminine-boy,” for he was a helpless punk. When people do not act stereotypically, they break the rules, and life is thus uncertain. I guess there is no room in our American culture for those who like to both nurture and torture ants.

**Works Cited**
