Enduring Gender Expectations as a Child

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Growing up as a young girl meant that almost everything that I owned was pink, my toy collection consisted of dolls, and a LEGO playset made for girls—meaning the pieces were pastel coloured and made to build houses and their interiors, not castles and spaceships like the boys’ sets. Although media would stand to make me think that I needed to cater to men, so that I could find and marry one, growing up with a single-mother led me to believe otherwise. My mom provided me with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed for me to succeed in the educational system. Though we faced challenges, there was great importance put on my education.

In school, there were many messages sent about appropriate boy and girl behaviour. If boys were mean to girls, it was only because they liked them. It was acceptable for boys to value sports more than grades, but the same case did not apply to girls. Boys could wear exposing clothing, but girls could not, because their body parts were a distraction to the boys. Girls could hug, but boys could not show affection without risking their masculinity. It was perfectly okay for boys to aspire to be professional sports players, but girls had to pursue academically involved careers or careers pertaining to domesticity or beauty. In high school, there was only a football team for the boys, which gave them certain advantages, like opportunities for scholarships—which were not an option for me as a girl. Teachers had different, even separate, expectations for girls and boys.

Though I came from a working class family, there was never a question of my academic abilities, because I was a girl and girls were always expected to persevere through hardships to excel academically. I was very aware of social class situation of my mom and me, but in the grade-schools I attended, everyone was generally in the same boat as I was, economically. It was not until high school that I began to feel like a poor girl—a place where all the ‘popular,’ wealthy girls had their own cars, brand-name clothes, and houses to which they would host parties at. Boys could dress down, because they were not expected to care about being stylish—in fact, it was strange if they did, but as a female, I was especially judged by my appearance; my makeup had to be done, my hair had to be visually satisfying, and my clothing had to look expensive—that is what it meant to be a woman.

Coming from a working class family, I did tend to feel out of place. Everyone seemed to think they needed to prove themselves to the world in certain ways, usually through appearances, mannerisms, and social and economic statuses. I noticed that the wealthier students were more inclined to fit themselves into socially constructed gender roles. With the power that money and status gave the ‘jocks’ at school, they were less inclined to step outside of these roles, and continued to support social inequalities. *Restacking the Deck* mentions that socially constructed gender ideals result in females doing academically well in school, but not enrolling in sciences, engineering, or math programs. When I was choosing a program to apply for in University, not once did I even think to choose a science-related major or to enter into an engineering program. In my mind, I knew that I was a girl and I especially excelled at writing and reading, so my applications were for language programs. I hate to say that my socially constructed gender role likely led me to want to pursue teaching as a career, but I believe that it did. The need to nurture and support children is woven into the social construct of my gender.

I remember being aware of the individuals who did not conform to gender role expectations, mostly because they would be pointed out by other students. If a boy had been perceived as sensitive, the girls did not want to date him. The other boys, who feared appearing anything but ‘masculine,’ made fun of sensitivity; males appeared less and less sensitive over time due to the negative consequences it had to their social status. Issues of sexuality certainly intersected with notions of gender, because those who identified as gay males were regarded as feminine, and those who identified as lesbian females were regarded as masculine. Your sexual preference largely impacted how you were perceived by others under the socially constructed ideas of gender. Considering innate difference theories, the socially powerful people in school who modelled ‘norm’ behaviours would blame, and encourage the less powerful people who did not fit the norms, to blame themselves for the obstacles that they faced. It is difficult for people to look past the political structure of others to acknowledge the individual.

References

Clandfield, D. (2014). *Restacking the Deck: Streaming By Class, Race and Gender in Ontario Schools*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.