

Breaking Social Norms

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The norm that I broke was inspired by the idea of gender roles. The idea was that women are treated differently based on how “feminine” they look, the way they are dressed, and the way they act. The social assumption by many is that all women are supposed to have makeup on, their hair done, and a cute outfit (pretty top, skirt, or dress). Whereas people assume that baggy pants/shorts, T-shirts (sometimes with male identifying writing: video games, rock bands...), and gym shoes are a very male type of dress. Also, girls are expected to always be bubbly, personable, demur, polite, and smiling when talking to store owners and other patrons. Guys are “allowed” (by society) to talk normal, schlep around and not worry about their appearance. If a girl were to do this, as I prove later, she gets treated not very well and with less respect. (except at Home Depot)

I tested my experiment on two different days (three days apart). On both days I traveled to the same exact set of stores, very close to my house. The first day I went to them was to run errands for my mom; the second day was to test my hypothesis by comparing it to the first. I went to the grocery store, the bakery (Servatii’s: by my house), JCPenney, and Home Depot. On the first day I was dressed very cute. It was really warm outside, and I had an adorable, blue skirt and a pretty green top. I also had on jewelry and a pair of strappy sandals. I straightened and styled my hair and put on makeup. I, as always, was very polite and I smiled a lot. On the second day (three days later), I went back to the same places, but this time dressed very slovenly. I wore a pair of baggy, black, basketball shorts, my brother’s Mario T-shirt, a UC baseball cap and gym shoes. I threw my hair up into a ponytail and wore no makeup. I was still polite, but didn’t act as bubbly and didn’t smile as much. I went in with the same purposes, to get things I needed and to get out.

The difference in reactions is astonishing. I will start with the first day. I, in my ultra girly outfit, set out to the grocery store. I went in to get a box of cereal, a gallon of milk and some bananas. While walking in I observed my first reactions. A few patrons of the store/employees that I passed smiled and said hello. I filled my basket with the bananas and milk. Then, the real kicker happened next, when I went to get cereal. I decided to wait until a Kroger employee came down the aisle. When I saw one I began to reach for a top box “with some difficulty” (not really). Immediately, the guy ran over and said, “Here let me help you with that Miss.” (just wait until later when I test this on day two) When I went to check out, the people were very polite and smiled toward me a lot (the bagger even asked how my day was and struck up a conversation with me). I then went to Servatii’s bakery where an elderly woman and a teenage boy were working. I went in to buy a cupcake and one of their little bags of cookies. After saying what I wanted, the teenage boy got my order while the lady rang me up. Both very nice and polite, and after reiterating my order, I was charged for a cupcake and the bag of cookies. The teenage boy handed me the bag with an odd, dorky grin on his face. The next two stores were JCPenney and Home Depot. At JCPenney, I was practically stalked by every employee asking if I needed any help, did I need them to get that shoe in a different size, etc. One employee stopped folding clothes to come over to say, “ You know we have those exact wash of jeans, but in different styles of straight, boot-cut and skinny in that section over there. Would you like me to show you? I didn’t buy anything, but I got offered perfume and makeup samples. The last store was Home Depot. Now, I have to warn you, this experience was ridiculous...just terrible. I went in to get caulk for my mom and I to fix the back door to our house so rain water cannot come in. I brought an empty tube of the stuff we had used before, so I knew exactly what kind to get. I barely came in the door a couple feet and one of the

employees (a man, of course) comes up to me and in a very patronizing way says, “What are we looking for today? I can help you find it, Miss.” I told him that I was good and that I didn’t need any help, but thanks. Now I know employees are suppose to be nice and helpful to customers. I am not opposed to that. I only became offend after I was then approached three more times before getting to the caulk aisle and asked if I needed any help, “Miss”. It was the way they said “Miss” that got me. While comparing and looking for the exact brand I needed I was then approached by a fourth, male, employee who proceeded to try and sell me other caulk products, which were crappy and not waterproof, and more expensive. I bought my caulk and went on my way.

On day two it was a different story, which can be summed up rather quickly. At the grocery store I got bread and peanut butter. Dressed in my unflattering clothes, I went into the aisle, where a guy was stocking shelves, and proceeded to reach for the jar of peanut butter. She didn’t budge. I had to stand on the bottom shelf to reach the peanut butter. (I am short) I did not have a conversation with the bagger. Needless to say, when I went to get some of the soft pretzel sticks at the bakery (so delicious by the way), I did not get the smile and politeness with which I had the day before. At JCPenney I was ignored by the employees and even got a few shifty glances, as if to say, “You don’t look like a girl, nor do you look fashionable, what the heck are you doing here.” At Home Depot, I guess I looked man-like and like I could handle my self in the store and was only asked once if I needed help.

I did get the reactions I thought I would, proving my theory. I’ve noticed this for years that if I was in a hurry and threw on baggy sweatpants and no makeup, you are treated different. I truly believe it has to do with the fact that I am a girl. As a girl if you are dressed “girly” you are treated nicer in “women appropriate” (deemed by society) stores. For example, if a girl goes

into the Bare Essentials or Sephora makeup stores in Kenwood, dressed guy-ish she will not get any service. They ignore you; not thinking that this woman is fully capable of purchasing something here and maybe just ran out the door in sweatpants and no makeup. People at clothing stores give you smug looks if you are not dressed fashionable/girl-like at the time. It's as if they are thinking, "I shouldn't bother helping her if she doesn't even dress right."

Not only are these reactions somewhat insulting, but also what are even more insulting are the ones a girl gets when going into "male appropriate" stores. When dressed as a girl and entering Home Depot, I felt patronized by the employees (it is mostly run by men). When I dressed manlier, I felt I was given more respect. I think that there is an instinctive belief among men to think of women in a pre-21st century fashion. They are reminded of this femininity by your dress, hair and makeup when you see them. In the case of Home Depot I believe the men look over and see the skirt and jewelry and instantly think 1950s housewife...Donna Reed and Lucille Ball. It is as if they are thinking this cute little woman can't do a "man's" job of home repair and maintenance. This in fact is not true with the fact that women juggle multiple jobs well. Just look at WWII. When the men went off to war, the women stayed at home took care of the kids, ran the household, and took on a job for the war effort. Women are just expected to do all these jobs at once, yet I feel are still not recognized for their work. This becomes apparent in how they are treated in situations, like Home Depot, with men.

As I was writing this I also came up with another small theory that not only does this have to do with gender, but also presented a social class issue. If a person looks the part in a clothing/makeup store or a hardware store then they are given the time of day because they look like the setting they are in and are treated as a paying customer. Coming into a tools shop dressed in a skirt and makeup allows them to make assumptions that you have money, you do not

know what you are doing in the store, and that you can easily be taken advantage of. The opposite is true in the clothing store. If you look like you are fashionable, there is an assumption that you have money and will purchase a lot. I believe that the way a person dresses defines their gender and social class statuses in people's minds. By breaking the social norm of what is specified as male and femaleness/high or low class, a woman can be treated more negatively or positively depending on their setting. Even though we live in a high tech 21st century world, ideals of gender and class are still deeply rooted in our society.