

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Gender Roles in Our Genes? \*

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In our culture, we tend to have specific gender role stereotypes – ways in which we expect men and women to act. Men are expected to be sexually assertive, aggressive and inclined to want many sexual partners. On the other hand, women are supposed to be more sexually passive and want to have lasting relationships. What causes this behavior?

**Genetics.** *Sociobiologists* argue that most human behavior is based on our *genes*. They say that all species have to develop strategies that will ensure their survival – their reproduction. Of course, if a species does not reproduce, it disappears.

According to sociobiologists, to enhance reproduction, men try to have sexual intercourse with as many women as possible. Thus, the men who were more sexually hesitant, unresponsive or unappealing would be less likely to reproduce – and would be weeded out. In contrast, sexually aggressive and promiscuous men would have more children – passing on their aggressive sexuality genes to their many sons.

Sociobiologists hypothesize that women developed a different strategy. With a 9-month pregnancy and the responsibility of raising the children, her investment is much longer than the time it takes for the sexual act. Therefore, she needs to select her mate carefully and entice him with sex into remaining to care for the children.

Over hundreds of thousands of years, men gradually evolved into wanderers who were easily sexually aroused and aggressive. In contrast, women became the "*nesters*." To provide a stable environment for their offspring, they try to lure their men into an enduring relationship.

**Learning.** In contrast to the sociobiologists, social scientists tend to emphasize *learning*. Our society continually tells children how to behave. They learn what toys to use, what activities to do, how to dress and how to behave and feel sexually. Boys learn to behave in *masculine* ways, and girls learn to behave in *feminine* ways – as they are defined by our culture.

Evidence of these learned sexual inclinations come from cultures that are different from ours. In relation to our culture, their sexual behaviors seem to be reversed. For example, in some South American Indian cultures, men play the main role in parenting. There are other societies in which men are sexually passive. Among the Wodaabe nomads of Niger, the men are very tall, lean and graceful. In terms of our culture, these men are very feminine. They lavishly decorate themselves – using cosmetics, feathers, cloth and beads.

In her 1987 book, *The Myth of Two Minds*, Beryl Benderley examined three apparently scientific "*truths*":

1. Men and women think and act differently.
2. These differences are definitely based on physiology.
3. The traditional gender roles in our culture are determined by biology.

After evaluating many scientific studies and various arguments, Benderley thought she was forced to conclude that the above "*scientific truths*" were little more than personal bias and opinion. Although there are some physical differences, they only have a minimal effect on the intelligence and personalities of men and women. According to Benderley, the supposed genetic differences between the sexes "*have no bearing at all on the great issues that face our society: how to apportion power, work, and responsibility.*"

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**Rather than viewing causes in terms of "either-or" categories,  
it is often more productive to consider an interaction of factors.**

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**Interaction.** What we have here is the almost constant argument of which is more important – genetics or environment, heredity or learning, nature or nurture. Rather than continuing this ancient argument, both sides seem to be moving toward an acceptable middle ground – *interaction*. Biology and learning work together to determine both masculine and feminine behavior.

An example of this interaction can be seen even in recreation. Even before they attended school, boys throw harder and have tighter grips than girls. In contrast, girls have more body flexibility and fine muscle control. Knowing this, parents are more likely to teach boys to play baseball and girls to dance ballet.

Unfortunately, most parents do not understand that the biological sexual differences are just averages. Although the averages may differ significantly, the sexes overlap greatly. Many boys are capable of dancing ballet, while many girls have the skills needed for baseball. Rather than emphasizing the average difference, if you emphasize the overlap in skills between men and women, you become more aware that both men and women are capable of doing most tasks. Thus, rather than segregating the sexes into separate activities because of relatively small average differences – the same activities can be cultivated for both men and women. In this way, the best performers – regardless of sex – will have a chance to demonstrate their abilities.

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\* Adapted from Adelaide and Kurt Haas' *Understanding Sexuality*, Times Mirror/Mosby College Publishing, 1990, pages 216-217.