



SERENA PATTERSON, PH.D., R. PSYCH.

A clinical psychologist in private practice in Courtenay, BC, Dr. Patterson received her Ph.D. from SFU in 1992, and taught courses in Psychology, Human Development, Women's Studies, and Social Justice at North Island College from 1992 until 2011. Her writings on family and gender have appeared in the *Island Word* (where she and her partner, Monika Grunberg, RCC, have a monthly column), the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, and *Canadian Women's Studies*.

***PSYCHOLOGY AND GENDER:
COMPLICATIONS AT THE CROSSROADS***

“I’m Pan-sexual,” declares the young woman across from me. “I’m attracted to people. Gender just isn’t an important category for me; I’m more about personality, thoughtfulness, and creativity.”

“I don’t think being transgendered is about crossing over any divide,” explains the beautiful student who has chosen her name as that of a tree. “‘Trans’ is short for ‘transcendence’.”

Nothing messes up a Women’s Studies class like abandonment of binaries. A new term, “Gender Queer”, is on the rise among mostly-young adults who refuse to declare themselves as being simply and forever female or male, gay or straight. One would think that we had reached a point where it is possible to simply step out of gender like changing clothes; like we thought we could at age three-and-a-half when, according to the Cognitive Developmentalists, we didn’t yet understand the permanency of being male or female.

Alas, it isn’t that simple. Depending upon the person (or perhaps depending upon what kind of day that person is having), gender is a jail, a gift, a rigid script, an improvisational performance, a palette for experimental art, a key to unlock sexual passion, a life sentence to drudgery, a trap, or a chosen path. Gender is still arguably the single most important attribute defining and shaping our lives from birth until death. The more we have learned about gender, the more complex it has become through the lens of psychology and therapy, and the more complex it becomes the more elusive the subject itself. And yet, it remains;

and its implications for our lives are enormous. One of the **first things that I learned about gender is that it is a powerful cultural marker for who does what in everyday life.** “You can play army, but only if you are a nurse,” said my older brother at the wise age of 10. He may have added, “and you can’t be a general!”

Girls, my brother correctly perceived, were being trained in the skills and the arts of nurturance of human bodies. Combat between those bodies was the exclusive realm of boys. Moreover, girls negotiated whereas boys exchanged orders. Play groups were segregated, if not by teachers, then by the children themselves. Maccoby’s (1998) powerful study of same-sex play groups and the communication patterns that they engendered (pun unintended; but appreciated) still rings true, and still helps us to decode and understand much of the frustration of women in mixed gender workplaces. A woman may give orders, even be a general ‘now-a-days.’ However, she can still be cut down in a way that her male workmates don’t experience with accusations that she is failing at kindness, nurturance, and empathy. I have yet to meet a man who was threatened by the accusation that he was “intimidating”; and I have yet to meet a woman who was not.

The second lesson that I learned about gender was that boys were more valued, if not actually better than girls. Again, my 10-year-old brother first pointed out the invisible-but-powerful truth of this. Men, he claimed, did everything better than women. All the most famous writers, scientist, athletes, and even chefs and fashion designers were men. Jesus’s disciples were men, all twelve of them. My brother’s trump line in the competition between the sexes was unarguable: “Name me one female president, Serena. Just one.”

Thus began a quest that led me to become not only a feminist psychologist, but also an instructor and scholar of Women’s Studies; something was

wrong with that picture and I was determined to decode what it was.

Of course, we now understand that the impact of biological sex upon talent potential is at most slight and subtle. There may, or may not be average sex differences in how, and how well, we process verbal, nonverbal, social and mechanical kinds of information. The interaction between sex hormones, body anatomy, culture and individual experience does not allow us to neatly study one influence upon brain development in isolation from the other three.

But potential is one thing; and behavioral expression is another. In every instance of alleged sex differences in behavior studied to date, the size of the difference greatly depends upon whether or not the behavior is being openly observed and by whom. That is, in private and when no one is watching, men and women of every culture behave more similarly than they do when there are witnesses. Sex appears to have little direct impact upon the human potential for developing abilities. Gender, however, has a great deal of impact upon the public expression of those abilities, and of a great deal else besides.

The principle that male and female humans should have a great deal of overlap in their ability to develop a talent or trait makes great evolutionary sense. More than any other species that we know of, humans have sacrificed “instincts” as fixed action patterns for the flexibility of being able to learn, adapt and invent strategies for survival and reproduction on-the-spot. Our long childhoods mean that we have often outlived the death of at least one gendered parent, and the ability of the other to pick up the slack without biologically-determined limitations must have saved the tribe many times. Our ability to adapt gender roles to changing geographic, economic and political realities explains not only the survival of our species but also the great variety of culturally specific gender arrangements

that have existed across time and place. Yet every culture does differentiate jobs by gender, and every culture has beliefs and expectations about the psychological characteristics of each gender that are consistent with this job differentiation. These differentiations are most rigidly enforced when gender becomes a marker not only for one’s life duties but also for status and privilege within the society. What galled me about my brother’s statements was not only the idea that there were things I wasn’t supposed to do; it was that whatever I did in life would be assumed to be less important and less accomplished than his activities, simply because I was female.

Adults often deny the clear perceptions of children. Hence, I was assured by well-meaning and kind adults that men and boys were not really better or smarter than females, and that the importance of motherhood weighed positively against the importance of all of the medals, publications and political offices in which men dominated. Nevertheless, **the third lesson I learned about gender is that the distribution of resources does not mirror this theoretical equality.** Taking care of other people may be important, but it doesn’t pay off economically. Largely because of the strong association between unpaid care work and female gender, women are by far the more vulnerable gender economically. The oft-quoted statement of former UN Chief Kofi Anan that “women make up half the world’s population and perform two-thirds of the world’s work, but own less than 1% of the world’s wealth” may be a statistically unverified factoid, but it certainly rings in the direction of truth. Economic vulnerability is still a major issue that lies, if not in the forefront, then in the background of psychological and emotional vulnerability. The spectre of being “one man away from poverty” or “one paycheck away from homeless” still has powerful implications in the consulting room.

But is it still so? **A fourth lesson about gender that I learned, especially as a young woman**

following and attempting to live out the Feminist Revolution, is that change is possible.

A recent Maclean's Magazine cover (Guili, March 2012) claimed that 40% of married women now earn more than their male spouses. Are women moving to the top? If only it were that simple.

Gulli's finding is a very interesting, and speaks volumes about the changing economic landscape and what it may mean for the future of gender roles and expectations. It complicates, but does not cancel the association between gender and money (see Townson, 2009 for an analysis of this). First, it does not speak of the realities of single parents, the vast majority of whom are women in double jeopardy for poverty: first because of the lingering wage gap between women and men (a gap that is magnified between mothers and fathers, as it is primarily mothers that bear the brunt of wage discrimination), and secondly because of the unshared burden of caregiving work, which eats into the hours for earning a living. Moreover, it does not address the main cause of families living off the mother's wage; that being the underemployment and unemployment among men. The disappearance of blue-collar jobs paying a "family wage" over the last four decades in Canada led first to mothers entering the work force for "extra" money, and later to the phenomenon of families needing two full-time wages to keep above the poverty line. The family's "second career" is also a buffer against the likelihood of unemployment in the first career. Finally, it does not address the lived reality of these families in transition, whereby traditional role definitions of father-as-provider and mother-as-nurturer are forced by circumstance to be questioned or abandoned.

One big trend in gender and the economy is that women have flooded into post-secondary education, and men have not. In my years as a community college instructor, I watched the feminization of post-secondary education with excitement and concern. At home, my female

students were feeling the pressure of holding relationships together across a growing education and social-class divide. Unlike class divisions in marriages of previous decades, where the men tended to have at least slightly more education and at least slightly higher earnings than their wives, this new class division is "reversed". Education empowers; it leads to better understanding and better articulation of one's values, one's needs, and one's place in the world. When women move forward and their men fail to follow, there are consequences that we have yet to fully understand. The combination of "white collar woman, blue collar man" is a culturally new and powerfully common phenomenon that I, as a clinician, am watching and hoping to learn more about.

A fifth lesson I learned about gender in life is that it is, with it's seemingly endless prescriptions of "should's" and "should not's", deeply entwined with violence and with shame.

Women who experience gendered violence appear to be living out some ancient code that says, "no matter how far you travel, how hard you work or how much your life appears to deny it, you are still female and therefore vulnerable. You are still just a woman, reducible to your sexual body, accountable to the wants and whims of men." The Madonna-whore dichotomy that casts women as either pure and worthy or sullied and worthless is also very much alive in sexual double standards, pornography, and the dark recesses of our collective self-concept. Men who face unemployment, and/or wives who are surpassing them in education, feel the shame not only of underachievement, but also of failed masculinity. It's not easy going along with a level playing field if you can't afford to come in second.

This final lesson about gender—that it could be fun—came much later in my life courtesy of the "Queer" community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, along with other gender rebels. "All this time, I thought it was my Inner Bitch calling me," I joked, "but it was my

Inner Butch!” Coming out as a lesbian in my 30’s, and beginning a same–sex romance that turned into marriage, allowed me to look at gendered expectations in a new and less encumbered way. Unhooked from bruised egos and assumptions about “Who’s on top”, questions about who drives the car, cuddles the kids, brings home the bacon or fries it up in the pan are settled according to whim or expedience. If it turns out that the urge to protect my family from the lions (or from the grumpy neighbor next door) is a masculine (or Butch) thing, that’s kind of exciting; even spicy. Drag queens and kings are, to my eyes, a new kind of sacred clown, deconstructing and poking fun at the constraints of gender under the protective umbrella of “camp” humour. Burlesque, too, has re–emerged within the Queer community as a place where gender is both celebrated and challenged. As an openly Lesbian woman, I can truly enjoy lace and pink (especially on other people) without the fear that it may imply personality traits like weakness or gullibility that I didn’t sign on for. I revel in the possibilities of mixing things up: give me a Chainsaw Femme or a Lipstick Butch any day and I will be delighted.

I love the courage of those young people with whom I started this story, as they invent the language and manners to transcend gender. It’s no surprise that they would want to do so. And yet their brave steps out of the gender binary came with great personal struggle. The very fact that they need to create these spaces free from gender speaks loudly of all that is wrong in the co–opting of gender as a marker for privilege, possession and oppression.

What is the take–home lesson for psychologists about gender in the 21st century? Gender is an

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active thing; it is something that we “do” as individuals, families, institutions and cultures. We are ‘acting it out’ and reshaping it all of the time. Change comes painfully slow as measured by the frustration of one who is held back or

oppressed by it, and yet faster than society expectations and institutions can hope to keep up with. Gender is a marker for many unjust distributions of work, play, food, money, status, time—just about everything that we value in life. And yet it is also a very attractive

and dynamic aspect of our lives, with an endless fascination and a bit of the spiciness of difference, diversity, sexuality and creative force about it.

And yet, for all of its power, gender is a pervasive, yet often invisible force in people’s lives. If the first rule of sexism is that it works, the second rule is that no one is to admit that it works. To name it is to question its legitimacy. Then comes the process of deconstructing it to make way for more freeing, joyful ways to be human (male, female, in–between and/or transcendent).

As psychologists, we can be powerful witnesses and sources of validation for people who are struggling with societal and personal constructions of gender. We can steer them toward written works and/or powerful role models of gender creativity (for example, the very Canadian writer Ivan Coyote, the ubiquitous but still wonderful K.D. Lang, and the many others that clients and students point out to me). We can study and educate ourselves in the dynamics of power and privilege within organizations, families, opposite–sex, and same–sex relationships. We can be midwives of change.

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