

## What “Gender is a Social Construct” Means to Me

By [Elizabeth DeOrnellas](#)

**Getting to know teachers and students who are part of [Gay-Straight Alliances](#) has been incredibly powerful for me.** I grew up as a self-defined feminist. I spent a lot of time trying to define what it meant to be a woman (and what it meant to be a man). I thought of those two concepts as, if not polar opposites, definitely binary. The first time I heard someone say, “Gender is a social construct,” I felt like I had been hit by lightning. In retrospect, it seems like a completely obvious idea. At the time, it felt revolutionary.

For many people today, the concept that gender is not a biological fact IS revolutionary. Or at least it would be, if said people allowed themselves to really reflect on what it means to separate sex (which is biological) from gender (which is a social construct).

***Here’s what I mean** (if you already understand and/or agree with the paragraph above, feel free to skip down past the next three paragraphs):*

***\*Sex is biological. It is determined by our chromosomes. Men are XY; women are XX;** many people do not fit neatly into either of those two categories (there are people who are born with three chromosomes, or incomplete chromosomes - it can get complicated).*

***\*Gender is a social construct. It is constructed differently depending on cultural traditions.** This process starts early. For example, in the United States, many people still follow the “pink for a girl” / “blue for a boy” theory of nursery decorating or baby clothes buying. One of the first questions we ask pregnant women is, “Is it a boy or a girl?”*

*What happens when that baby is born? Even if the nursery is a (relatively) newfangled shade of green or yellow, most communities immediately start reinforcing gender norms. Americans teach young boys to be tough, to defend themselves, to hide their tears. We teach young girls to be dainty (or sexy, unfortunately that trend is accelerating), to care about their hair and their clothes, to use charm as their default mode of communication.*

I didn’t really conceptualize what it means to be a thoughtful parent under the cultural systems described above until one of my fellow teachers started talking about how uneasy it made her to see her son (*a bright preschooler with long, flowing blonde hair*) start to pick up on gender norms at daycare and at school. She worried when he came home and reported that he had treated friends in a particular way because they were girls instead of boys. It bothered her that he had done so because he felt his classmates or his teachers expected him to. He was too little to really articulate all this; she had to read between the lines. She didn’t know how to respond. Her husband worried that their son would become the target of bullies. He wanted to teach him to fight. She wanted to teach him to be kind. She wasn’t sure what the kindest thing to do was.

**I bought into a binary gender system for a long time. I spent a lot of time and emotional energy defining myself as a woman.**

*Here are some of my personal traits that I find annoying because I consider them “stereotypically feminine”:*

**\*I get lost easily.** It takes me a really long time to learn how to navigate a new place. I accepted this truth about myself in high school when I attended a volleyball camp at the University of Maryland. The campus is large, but not labyrinthine. I remember getting a lot of good-natured ribbing from my friends about my constant inability to pick the right direction when we were trying to decide which way we needed to walk.

When I started driving, my inability to trust my own sense of navigation became a bigger issue. It got to the point where I began reflexively assuming, especially when driving around an unfamiliar place, that whichever way I *thought* I should turn was probably the opposite direction of where I was trying to go. I thanked god for mobile navigation systems. Periodically I would go through phases where I’d try to wean myself off the GPS. I hate being late, so I usually gave up on those efforts pretty quickly.

*On some level, this issue may be genetic. Growing up, I unapologetically (and, to be honest, sometimes gleefully - humor born of frustration isn’t always kind) snapped photos from the back seat when my parents launched into their inevitable road trip arguments (featuring bound roadmaps that gradually morphed into Mapquest printouts). My mom believes in asking for directions, but not enough to force my dad to actually do it. My dad believes in trying side roads; he hates being stuck in traffic.*

**\*I obsess about my hair.** I consider my hair to be my best feature. I get a lot of reinforcement on this belief, as nearly every new hairdresser that I’ve ever gone to has remarked on the color (*dark brown with red highlights if it’s been sunny*), natural wave, or thickness of my hair. I also consider hair care to be a time suck. I own a lot of beanies and scrunching gel, because I will always take 10 extra minutes in bed over the 10 minutes it would take to get my hair anywhere close to dry. I like the idea of 2-in-1 shampoo/conditioner, but that particular “just buy the right product and you can achieve ‘low maintenance’” theory almost always turns out to be flawed.

I swam competitively, year-round, from age seven through the end of high school, and I had to reluctantly accept that real conditioner was the only way to combat the chlorine damage. My hairdresser growing up (*who stuck with me through most of college even though as a little kid I would cry in the chair if I thought my hair had been cut too short*) used to complain about my constant split ends. I just felt blessed my hair never turned green - that’s not a myth; I had multiple blonde friends whose hair turned either white or yellow-green under the influence of sun and chlorine.

**\*I obsess about my weight.** I believe this is a combination of spending half my life in a bathing suit (*when your sports are swim and volleyball, waiting until the summer to get in shape isn't really an option*) and being an American woman in the age of Photoshop.

I went to humanities [Governor's School](#) the summer before senior year of high school; that's probably the first time I ever heard an academic critique of [body shaming](#). It didn't stick. I realized how bad the problem was during my sophomore year of college. I was driving with two other classmates to a professor's house for a party. We were all athletes. None of us were out of shape. We got into an in-depth discussion about dieting and weight tracking. I have a really vivid memory of one of the girls saying, "All girls can talk about this." I remember feeling an immediate shock of recognition and a wave of sadness.

**\*I think just as much about what I look like eating as what I'm eating.** That whole, "Girls just order a salad" thing? I've been that girl. For long stretches of time. Not always. But a lot.

**\*I'm uncomfortable with salary negotiations.** Part of that is a simple lack of practice: Most of my post-college working career has been spent as a teacher, which meant the district set my pay scale (*according to strict restrictions put in place by the state legislature*) and "negotiation" solely meant trying to make sure I got credit for my years of teaching experience and my higher education degrees. When I started seriously looking into charter schools, where they actually ask you about salary in the interview process, I felt incredibly unprepared. Talking about my qualifications? That I know how to do. Talking about what I think I'm worth on a monetary scale? Not a skill set I have successfully acquired yet.

**\*I hate when authority figures use the word "quiet" to describe me.** I have an immediate negative reaction to the word "quiet" when it is used in the context of evaluation or feedback. In my experience, authority figures typically use that word to describe women who they feel aren't acting like leaders. The subtext is "mousy"; the implication is "limited." Men who are quiet are often described as "hard-to-read," "stoic," or "thoughtful." The subtext is "determined"; the implication is "could surprise us."

When I get that particular piece of feedback from a man, I immediately get my back up. If a female authority figure tells me I should speak up more, I tend to react better. Just an ingrained bias - the first feels patriarchal and patronizing to me; the second feels like supportive mentorship. I should maybe rewatch more of Liz Lemon and Jack Donaghy on [30 Rock](#). Or just seek out female bosses. Or be my own boss. Or some combination of the three: Anything that starts out with "Watch more Tina Fey" is generally an acceptable life plan.

**\*I hate when people remark on my height.** I am 5' 3". I have been 5' 3" since ... approximately forever. Late elementary school? I remember being really happy when I finally hit 5' 3" on the measuring stick at the doctor's office. I remember being incredibly disappointed when I realized I would never even reach my mom's height of 5' 4".

My sister (*four years and two days younger than me*) fairly rapidly eclipsed me on the height front. I haven't always taken that gracefully. I don't always take it well when students remark on my height, either. When it's a freshman, I usually laugh, because a lot of those boys shoot up over the year, and some honestly don't realize until the end of the year how much taller than me they've become. When a senior says it, I frequently remark with a sarcastic, *"I've been the same height all year."*

Best compliment I've ever gotten from a colleague: *You seem like you're seven feet tall when you start giving directions.*

**\*I own a lot of shoes, and I feel awkward about it.** I didn't think I owned a lot of shoes until my dad nearly revolted on me one of the times in which I was packing for college move-in. He was absolutely horrified by the fact that I had an entire bag full of shoes. More than one bag, if we're being real. I half-heartedly launched into, *"But they're all for different things..."* before I saw the look on his face and decided to just start sorting out the ones I rarely wore.

**\*I can't stand it when people enforce gender norms in the context of sports.** I am incredibly competitive. As a kid, I really enjoyed the fact that female swimmers tend to peak first. (*"Peak" meaning your relative speed in relation to others your age.*) I was often the fastest swimmer, period, in my age group as an 8 & Under. As I got older, I had to train twice as hard just to keep up with the boys.

Lots of female swimmers peak around 12 or 13. As a female swimmer, you're lucky if you don't stop getting best times until after high school. It can be really difficult for competitive female swimmers who have trained hard for years to keep breaking their personal bests during college competition. A lot of female swimmers who make incredible gains in college either committed to swimming as their primary sport at a relatively late age or didn't train at an elite level as a younger athlete.

Competitive male swimmers tend to increase in speed throughout their competition years; they work hard to put on muscle mass in college, just like football and basketball players too. That strategy usually works. For female swimmers, weight-lifting and other forms of cross-training can also work. Obviously, those are all generalizations. Look up [Dara Torres](#)' career if you want to know what the exception to the rule looks like (*seriously, look her up - she's incredible*).

When I'm playing something like adult pickup volleyball, and someone starts to divide up teams by saying something like, *"Well, we have two girls here, so we'll start by putting one on each side,"* I get annoyed. Male and female volleyball players tend to have different strengths (*blocking versus digging, perhaps, especially if there's a height discrepancy*) but that doesn't mean one should automatically assume that gender determines either experience (*I'll draft a girl who played organized volleyball any day over a guy who didn't - the girl will probably know how to receive a serve*) or ability (*technique, not height, determines how good you are at a skill like*

*hitting - although net height inevitably changes the game, and co-ed games are often played at a net height that forces shorter players to focus their hitting more on placement than on heat).*

**\*It makes me really uncomfortable when men cry.** Just does. No explanation; just cultural conditioning.

**\*I hate crying in public.** Especially at work. It makes me feel weak. I also hate it when I can tell that I just starting winning an argument because the tears came out.

**\*I spend an inordinate amount of time picking out work clothes because I worry about whether or not I will be perceived as professional.** I have been spoken to by two different school administrators about my hem line. One was during my student teaching; she wasn't particularly nice about it; she just said that I needed to wear longer skirts because mid-thigh wasn't an appropriate length for a middle school teacher.

That supervisor actually spoke to me twice about it. The first time I was taken aback and didn't really say much of anything. The second time I reminded her that I was working for a nonprofit (Teach for America) and therefore was not being paid for my five weeks of student teaching. I didn't exactly have extra spending money to buy new clothes. *Plus, it was summer in the Bronx: I took full advantage of the fact that I could get away with wearing short sleeves and a skirt; I felt bad for the boys, who were expected to wear a long-sleeved shirt, tie, and slacks.*

The next administrator who spoke to me about the same issue was also a middle school administrator (*I've spent most of my teaching career in high school*). On my first full day of work as a long-term sub, she pulled me aside and said, *"There's nothing wrong with what you're wearing, but please try to make sure your skirts go all the way to your knee or past it. Middle school boys, you know..."* I appreciated the first part of that statement. Not so much the second part.

There is a place for tact in dress code (*I don't have a problem telling female students that they should be careful with how much cleavage and/or leg they are exposing, or telling male students that I don't want to see their underwear - I always thought it ironic that the same group of boys who would tell me that I should wear more sneakers, because in their neighborhood I should always be ready to run, had to pull up multiple layers of shorts just to walk across the classroom*), but I think that telling female teachers that it's their fault if male students are distracted or are reacting in inappropriate ways sends the wrong message.

Dress codes should be about respecting yourself and others. Telling girls they shouldn't wear a tube top that exposes half their breasts is one thing; telling girls that they should never wear spaghetti straps because the boys sitting behind them might be distracted by their bare shoulders is sending the wrong message to all the students.

**\*I get really frustrated with myself if I am flustered or forgetful because I don't want to be perceived as ditz.** Again, no explanation. Just ingrained cultural prejudice.

**\*I simultaneously crave and abhor the male gaze.** Honestly, it feels shitty to be out at a bar, feeling like you're the "ugly friend" in the group because you aren't getting any attention. It feels just as shitty to get an inordinate amount of attention from men you have absolutely no interest in because their interest in you is clearly only physical. Also, the second one feels threatening. We live in a rape culture.

I tend to reflexively up my bitch level in night-on-the-town situations because I'm often solely there to hang out with friends, and I have no interest in getting hit on when I'm not in the market for dating options. One of my male friends had to explain to me (*after hearing me complain about this issue for the umpteenth time*) that many men are into the bitch act because they like girls who play hard to get. I was annoyed. If that's how the world works, that feels like a no-win situation. It's even more annoying when the only line that makes a guy back off is, "I have a boyfriend." I hate feeling like being perceived as another man's property is the only thing that will cause a guy to stop trying to sleep with you.

**To took me a really long time to learn that so many of these issues don't just apply to women.**

*Men face a lot of the same societal pressures. American men are conditioned to believe that:*

\*It's not OK to be out of shape or otherwise deviate from societal standards of attractiveness. Current standards include the ability to be equally comfortable in a rumpled hoodie and a tux.

\*How much (and what) you consume reflects on your manhood. Food, alcohol - same deal.

\*If you're not athletic and/or you have no interest in talking sports, you will be shut out from a lot of personal and professional bonding opportunities.

\*It's not OK to cry. Especially in public. Especially at work.

\*Successful male leaders don't show vulnerability, doubt, or the need to consult with subordinates. Life is a competition. Prizes include money and women.

*"Putting yourself out there" is hard. It's arguably worse to be an awkward, nice guy in the age of online dating than to be a woman in a similar position.*

**What's the problem with all of this? It's still binary.** It doesn't leave room for the truth, which is that all of us exist on a spectrum. If we put a lot less energy into defining masculinity and femininity, and instead put a lot more energy into figuring out what our strengths and weaknesses are AS PEOPLE, we would be a lot happier.

Does that mean looks would suddenly cease to matter as currency in the dating world? No. There is a biological basis that underpins our attraction to certain physical features (*our obsession with women's hips for one - "curvy" as a compliment goes all the way back to ancient fertility goddesses*). Would we be more satisfied with our lives if we stopped defining beauty through the lens of Photoshopped supermodels? Yes. The actors, artists, and marketers who are working toward making that goal a reality deserve our sincere support.

**Own your personality.** Whatever it is. Whoever you are: Be you.

*It's OK if you don't know who that is. Reinvention can be invigorating. Or terrifying. Often both.*

*Don't be afraid to change. You don't have to be the same person forever. You don't have to be the same gender forever. You don't have to be a single gender at all. Gender is a social construct. Societal norms constantly evolve. Be a part of the change. Accept those who are already comfortable in their own skin.*

*Try to accept yourself as well. That part IS worth the effort.*