



## Perspective/Opinion

# Performative Masculinity: A Reflection on Learned Behavior

By S. Wolf Pulsiano, M3

Gender norms are social and cultural attitudes and expectations about behaviors, products, or professions, that are appropriate for individuals based on their gender identity. The IWill 3.0 Gender-Equity Pledge Campaign begins in March 2023 with the theme, "Broadening Gender Norms – Mitigating Stereotypes." One of the potential pledges will be: *"I Will examine how I perform, display, or embody the spectrum of masculinity and femininity in my work."*

This week, Wolf Pulsiano (he/they) reflects on that pledge:

I often find it difficult to reflect on masculine and feminine behaviors, in large part due to those binaries having been broken down from years of existing in a community where nonconformity is the norm. However, in a gendered society, it's impossible to ignore the ways in which we are brought up to interact with the world and how this affects the beliefs of those around us.

Even prior to coming out, gender stereotypes helped me to pass as male. As the only girl in my co-ed baseball league, I desperately wanted to fit in with the boys. The only punch I have thrown in my life was at the tender age of seven; one of the kids on my team had loudly proclaimed that I was a girl, and I was furious. We became friends soon thereafter, and nobody on the team dared to call me a girl again. As I grew slightly older, I was able to reflect on this experience in relation to the power dynamics of male relationships; to move up in the hierarchy, I had to prove that I was "man enough." To me, this meant better observing and replicating the behaviors that I saw in men. There were social cues, clothing choices, and ways of interacting with others that I studied; in my room at home with the door closed, I practiced how to walk "like a man," sit "like a man," and lower my voice into a monotone. To those who knew me, I was still a tomboy, as my circle of friends consisted of girls, and I therefore tried to emulate their interactions to fit in. To strangers, while I wasn't always perceived as male – most often, I was a "what is *that*?" – I was almost never seen as female. This went on for years; the more that I learned how to take up space and the less emotion that I displayed, the more often I passed as male.

One of the turning points in this social observation and learning occurred when I was accused of being sexist: a high school classmate misheard a comment that I had made to a female friend about cooking dinner at her house and called me out. I had previously thought that I was immune to being sexist, given that I had been subjected to its effects growing up. This led me to realize that being read as male did come with repercussions. To avoid perpetuating the misogyny I had seen over the years, it was necessary for me to re-evaluate what aspects of masculinity were beneficial and which were harmful. Was performative masculinity worth alienating my friends? The answer was obviously no; since then, I've tried to bear in mind how my interactions may be read from an outside perspective.

In a professional setting, it's difficult to know where I stand as someone who embraces both traditionally masculine and feminine stereotypes. Am I perceived as more capable because I'm seen as male, or more intuitive because I was integrated female? I hope that the ability to interact in both a feminine and masculine way – feminine as that's what I was brought up with; masculine as it was consciously learned – is beneficial in some way.

Without taking a conscious look at gender roles, it's difficult to reject them; gender is a journey that we are all on, whether we realize it or not. Therefore, my hope is that this prompt allows you, reader, to reflect on what masculine and feminine behaviors you have learned or accepted over the years, and further, which of these behaviors have been beneficial or detrimental to you or to others.

*Wolf (he/they) is an M3 aspiring to go into Family and Community Medicine with a focus in LGBTQ+ health and gender-affirming care. Over the chilly winter months, he has probably spent too much time scrolling Wikipedia with his cats.*