Dear Alice,

I have a rather awkward problem. (Or, at least it seems awkward to me!) I'm an eighteen-year-old woman and I make it a point to be courteous to everyone when I'm out in public. Recently, however, I began to notice something rather strange. Earlier this week, I held the door open for a man who absolutely refused to walk through. He said something along the lines of, "The hair on the back of my neck would stand up for years — please go through first."

This isn't the first time it happened — in fact, it seems to be happening more and more and only with men. My friends have a habit of jokingly calling me "macho," and say that men are afraid of me because I don't act very feminine. As a woman, I do fancy myself as good looking and perhaps a little assertive, but why does it seem like men don't appreciate courteous gestures like opening doors or pulling out chairs? It's starting to make me feel unattractive.

Do I have to start acting like a stereotypical girl, or is it okay to be courteous to everyone — men included? Any input you have would be a great relief!

Sincerely,

Nio

Answer

Dear Nio,

You're certainly stuck between a door and a hard place! When it comes to determining why you're getting this response from another gender, two concepts may be at play: gender roles and benevolent sexism. Gender roles are shared beliefs that apply to individuals on the basis of their gender expression. These are social norms that dictate what men and women "should" do, or what's considered admirable or attractive for their gender. Social norms such as these contribute to perceptions of both men and masculinity, as well as women and femininity. Even in cultures and contexts that are seemingly progressive, many still believe that women are particularly sensitive and in need of a man's protection — this is what's called benevolent sexism. Because benevolent sexism is often mistaken as harmless, many accept the associated norms (such as
men needing to hold the door for women) more readily, which may ultimately lead to gender discrimination. However, when it comes to treating people of any gender courteously and with respect, feel free to continue doing what you want to do, regardless of what stereotypes or gender roles expect from you.

Chivalry and its association with masculinity are long-standing, and in many ways assert that men are dominant over women. Gender norms in the US suggest that women ought to be communal, friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. Men, on the other hand, are stereotyped to be masterful, assertive, competitive, and dominant. This male dominance suggests protectiveness and politeness toward women; men are expected not only to protect women from threats, but also to deliver acts of courtesy, such as holding the door open. Research shows that when men are on the receiving end of such gestures — rather than delivering them themselves — they may experience decreases in self-esteem and self-efficacy (a person's belief in their own ability to achieve their goals).

Even though gender roles and benevolent sexism continue to be embedded in society, assumptions of male dominance are being challenged and discounted more and more. However, keep in mind that not every segment of society has subscribed to this way of thinking. Due to longstanding gender norms, some people may still feel you're behaving in a "masculine" way, leading to their discomfort. This likely contributes to why a man may feel less masculine if he’s not the one carrying out his "expected" gender role of holding the door for a woman.

The bottom line is this: being nice, helpful, and courteous is just that, and any associations between these characteristics and masculinity or femininity have been socially constructed. You asked if it’s okay to continue being courteous to everyone regardless of their gender expression, and the answer is undoubtedly “yes.” Treating those of all genders the same means you’re not engaging in gender discrimination. What’s more, research shows that people find intelligence and assertiveness — things considered masculine in the past — to be attractive qualities across genders now. So, go ahead and be courteous, assertive, and whatever else you want to be. And above all, continue being you!

Alice!

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