

# KILROY CAFÉ

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©2009, Glenn Campbell, PO Box 30303, Las Vegas 89173  
glenn@kilroycafe.com www.KilroyCafe.com



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# In Defense of Stereotypes

By GLENN CAMPBELL

It has become fashionable to say there is no difference between men and women, gays and straights, or between one race or culture and another. If you portray women as homemakers or gay men as walking around with a limp wrist and swish, you are supposedly engaged in bigotry and are perpetuating destructive stereotypes.

In an earlier era, people were imprisoned by those stereotypes. A woman would become a homemaker whether she wanted to or not because so many other roles were reserved for men and closed to her. Today, at least in North America and Europe, most of the barriers have fallen. Women can join the military and fight in combat. Men can become flight attendants and nursery school teachers.

And still the stereotypes persist. Males shoot guns, drink beer and watch football. Women primp and preen. Gay men flip their wrists and say how APPALLED they are at someone else's fashion sense. Nature designed these groups differently, so statistically they are going to behave differently.

If you try to point out these differences you are considered a bigot. According to current thinking, if someone from a certain genetic strain behaves in a manner typical of that group, it is only because SOCIETY MADE THEM DO IT, not because of any inborn inclination.

If women primp and preen and take an unusual interest in the aesthetics of their environment, it's only because the male-dominated culture expects it of them. If men treat women as sex objects and are drawn to mindless porn, it must be because the media already portrays women as sex objects and men learn from this what their role should be.

Rubbish! Stereotypes do not come out of thin air. There is almost always some truth to them. While it is unfair for an individual to be blocked by a stereotype from what he wants to do, it is equally destructive to say such patterns of behavior don't exist. By denying the behavior, you may be denying yourself an important tool for dealing with it in yourself and the people around you.

Human behavior is patterned by our genes. We may have "free will" but only within a framework that nature has designed for us. If you want to understand human behavior in the present, it's helpful to look at our genetic past, at what might have been critical to our survival in the hunter-gatherer days when our genes were formed.

If you love sweet and salty food today, it's because your genes set you up for it. If you can acknowledge this pre-programmed impulse, then your "free will" can adjust for it. If you refuse to acknowledge the role of your genes, then taste is your only guide, and you're going to turn into a little piggy.

Likewise, when dealing with others, you would be foolish not to acknowledge the patterns of behavior that are right in front of you. Saying that a male is "testosterone-driven" when engaged in certain risk-taking behaviors can be a pretty good shorthand for understanding his behavior and dealing with it. Whether testosterone itself is the culprit may be debatable, but you have to acknowledge that males are jumping off cliffs at an extraordinary rates compared to females. To deal with groups of males effectively, you have to grasp these typical patterns.

All humans are coping with powerful drives within themselves, and you can't simply talk them out of the resulting behavior. To a large extent you have to simply accept the behavior as it

is, and stereotypes are one tool for doing so. Males behave in a certain way, and so do females. A stereotype, refined by experience, may be a good starting point when you first meet someone. After that your actual experience with them takes over, and eventually the stereotype can be set aside.

Since we are dealing with a lot more people in our lifetime than we will ever know intimately, we have to have slots to slip them into. After talking with someone for two minutes, you can usually say, "Okay, I am familiar with this personality type and how to deal with them." There is nothing wrong with that, even if it leads to mistakes sometimes. Since you often don't have more than two minutes for assessment, making these judgments is an essential social skill.

There is also nothing wrong with seeing that someone is labeled "female" on the internet and approaching them differently than you would a male. Genes aside, being male or female implies a certain kind of life experience. It's only prudent to approach each gender with your stereotypes activated, just in case they might be true.

Even when all the practical barriers have fallen, you will still have people behaving in the manner "typical" of their group because that's what they choose to do. It's what feels good to them. To force them into cultural sameness is as bigoted as the original stereotypes once were.

Just because women can go to war doesn't mean most of them have any desire to. Sometimes, homemaker or fashion maven just works better.

—G.C.

[www.Glenn-Campbell.com](http://www.Glenn-Campbell.com)