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From left, Casey McIntosh, Nick Nikolich, Sociology Professor Georgeanne Rundblad and Patrice O'Neill practice knitting during Rundblad's Gateway class, prior to testing social reactions to performing the unusual task in public.

Unraveling Social Norms

November 20, 2006

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - When Illinois Wesleyan student Stephen Allhoff was asked to break a social norm for his "Boundaries and Borderlands" Gateway class, the first-year computer science major and theatre minor unknowingly created one. He decided to bowl in his dormitory hall using empty Gatorade bottles. The activity gained so much popularity that it was memorialized on Facebook.com, a social networking site geared towards college students, and, once it caught the attention of residence directors, was eventually banned in the first-year halls Munsell and Ferguson.

"Boundaries and Borderlands" is a class that aims, in part, to break social norms. The course is centered on the idea that we act in a socially constrained behavior. Says instructor Georgeanne Rundblad, professor of sociology, "How we act, talk and what we wear are all behaviors that are, for the most part, determined by what is accepted by society." Because of this socialization, Rundblad says, "We can never be totally free because we cannot behave without adhering to some type of limit." Such limits, she explains, are as simple as choosing to wear blue jeans because everyone else wears them; in doing so, we show that we may be afraid to step outside of what is generally accepted.

Many of Rundblad's assignments force her students to break social norms in some respect in order for them to fully understand the extent to which we are ruled by societal expectations. For the most recent assignment, Rundblad asked her students to knit in a public place. By doing this, she says, the students are "forced to become a minority at some level," as knitting is not often regarded as an everyday college student activity. Students were asked to assess their own level of comfort while performing the task and to record other people's responses to their action. This information was included in a reflection paper based on their experience.

Reactions to the assignment have been varied. Some females in the class, for example, have received a positive reaction to their knitting and have even been asked to teach others how to knit. Not all students, however, have experienced such a supportive reaction, as in the case of first-year student Monica Piotrowski, whose friends moved to another table when she pulled out her knitting at the Bertholf Commons during lunch, the busiest time for IWU's main cafeteria. "I imagine it would be much harder to be a 'macho' football player and knit than to be a woman, but I soon learned from some of the men in the class that their knitting was supported and praised" she says. "I think it is surprising that I was hassled and these guys were not. I question if this result would be consistent if the students were asked to perform an atypical yet stereotypically male task."

Reactions have been just as varied for male students in the class. Some have received comments marking knitting as a predominantly female activity. Says one male student in the class, "For some reason, it is hard for people to believe that a football player would enjoy knitting." Another male class member and football player knitted in the locker room before practice one day and received many verbal attacks. Allhoff, however, describes knitting as an "inadvertent chick magnet," and says that his fraternity brothers have accepted the activity. "It is very refreshing to see society willing to accept that break of the norm," he says.

Allhoff calls himself the "black sheep" of the class, since other male classmates have not received the positive reaction that he has. "In this world, it is more difficult for men to change over to a more feminine role," he says. "The idea of women assuming more masculine traits, however, is generally accepted."

Rundblad says that future class assignments will include wearing a pink triangle, the symbol for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, for a day. "In this activity," she notes, "it is less important for the students to observe others' reactions, and more important for them to recognize their own feelings as a result of this activity."

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