

What's in a stereotype?

Marsha Tufft

A humorous look at qualities that separate the engineers from the "enginerds"

What's the first thing you think of when asked to describe a nerd? Really smart? Wrapped up with computer assembly language and chemistry experiments? Would you list hobbies, such as computer programming and chess? Would you describe a nerd's social skills as, "Theorizes about quantum mechanics and thinks NCAA is a chemical equation, not a basketball tournament ... discourses on how air viscosity and a laminar boundary layer affect the spin and trajectory of a ping pong ball." Perhaps your physical description would include, "Wears glasses with black plastic frames mended with a Band-Aid. Lenses are so thick that you can see his entire face refracted in a single lens ... Wears a calculator slung on his belt the way John Wayne used to wear a holster."

Well, that catches the spirit of my "classic nerd"—a technical genius out of step with mainstream society, something of a social misfit. Notice I used the pronoun "he"; women just don't seem to convey the nerd image to the same degree of acute specialization. Perhaps it's the old stereotype of women as chatterboxes and social mixers, or maybe it's the relatively late arrival of women as serious contenders in the technical "nerd" professions. At any rate, the nerd stereotype doesn't stick as easily to a woman.

Okay, we've established an informal description of a

nerd. Can you buy into it? If it's close to your own concept, permit me to go one step further. It is the image of technical genius at the expense of mundane common sense that endows the nerd with much of his "nerdiness." Therefore, nerds are frequently thought of as being engineers. Does it necessarily follow that engineers are considered nerds? What exactly makes someone a nerd?

Being an engineer, I don't like to categorize without adequate defini-

tion. So having generated a somewhat rambling description, I'll try to develop a working definition of a nerd, or nerd qualities. According to *Random Thoughts Dictionary* (yet to be published), the definition of nerd is given as: *nerd* (nurd'), n. [slang, orig. Valley Speak, de Bronx, etc.] 1.

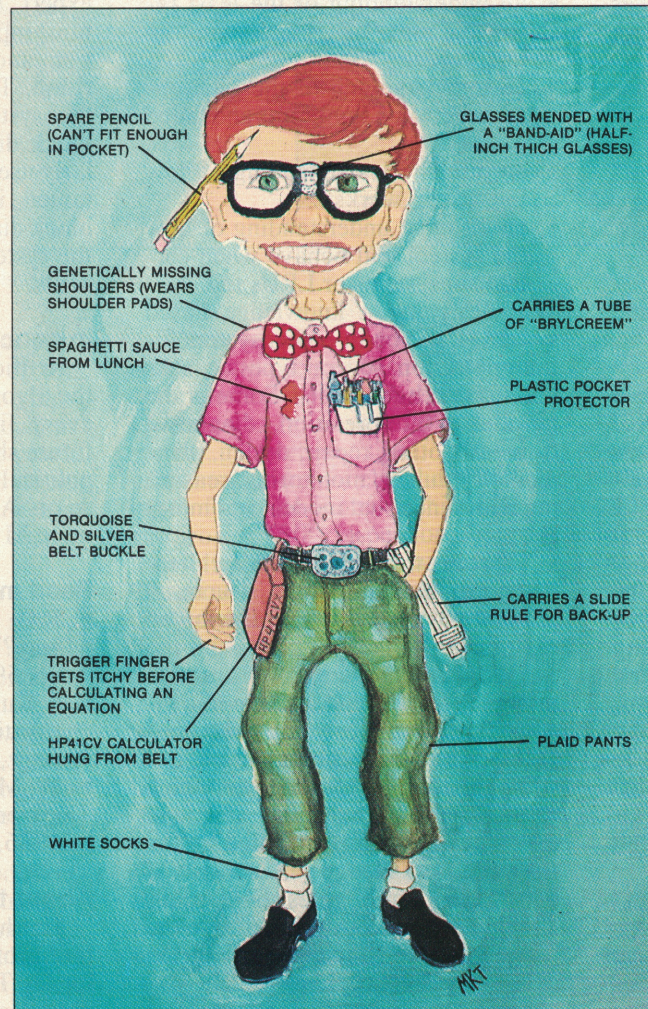
someone who does not fit the projected image of the socially accepted norm, as measured in terms of any or all of the following:

- a) physical appearance (including favorite fashion designer),
- b) personality and social skills,
- c) sense of humor,
- d) hobbies and interests,
- e) intellect (note: a nerd's intelligence quotient is usually much higher than the national average),
- f) motivation.

2. possessing qualities similar to a geek, but different. Antonyms: jock, preppie, yuppie.

Well that's fine, but how do engineers stack up against this definition? How are we perceived by other people? In order to address these questions, I took a statistically insignificant survey of 17 people, comprised of engineers, secretaries, spouses of engineers, and normal people. I asked them to give their impressions of engineers, preppies/yuppies, jocks and nerds (with the latter three categories being pure stereotypes). The table shown is a composite of these results.

To me, these results suggest a slightly greater identi-



Insignificant survey results

Characteristics	Engineer	Preppie/Yuppie	Jock	Nerd
Traits	INTELLIGENT BUT SOMETIMES BORING LOGICAL PICKY ORGANIZED PRACTICAL NOT TERRIBLY COLOR COORDINATED	SNOBBY STYLE CONSCIOUS MATERIALISTIC IN DEBT SELF-CENTERED CONCEITED WEARS <i>GUCCI</i> DESIGNER CLOTHES*	ARROGANT DENSE STRONG PHYS. COORDINATED CRUDE CHEWS <i>SKOAL</i> NO NECK	SHY/INTROVERTED SOCIALLY INEPT MIXES PLAIDS & STRIPES NO RHYTHM NARROW FOCUS WILL GET CONTACTS WHEN THEY MAKE THEM THICK ENOUGH
Hobbies	WORK COMPUTERS PHOTOGRAPHY HOME IMPROVEMENT	GOLF SAILING WASHING HIS CAR WORKING ON MASTER'S THESIS	WEIGHT LIFTING GIRL LIFTING MUD WRESTLING	CHESS STAMP COLLECTING DATABASE PROGRAMMING
Motivation	PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT	WEALTH, STATUS & FUN	FAME & MONEY	????
Driving Habits	DRIVES 50 IN FAST LANE	DRIVES 130 MPH	DRIVES OFF-ROAD	TAKES BUS
Sports	SOFTBALL	JOGGING	NAUTILUS	BIRDWATCHING
Music Preference	"SOFT" ROCK	TOP 40	COUNTRY OR HEAVY METAL	CLASSICAL
Favorite TV Show	<i>FAMILY TIES</i>	<i>thirtysomething</i>	AAA BASEBALL	<i>I LOVE LUCY</i>
Favorite Food	MEAT & POTATOES	VEGETARIAN	STEAKS	QUICHE
Favorite Drink	<i>LITE BEER</i>	<i>PERRIER</i> OR WINE	<i>GUINNESS</i> (BEER)	<i>KOOL-AID</i>
Investments	CD'S AND IRA'S	PLAYS STOCKMARKET	POKER	BINGO-CLUB MEMBER
Car	TOYOTA	BMW	4WD JEEP OR CORVETTE	AMC PACER
House	4 BEDROOM, 2 STORY	EXPENSIVE CONDO	RANCH	LAB OR LIVES WITH PARENTS
Spouse's Profession	TEACHER OR NURSE	LAWYER OR ADVERTISING EXEC.	HOUSEWIFE OR CHEERLEADER	UNMARRIED
Number of Kids	2-5 DEPENDING ON RELIGION	"WHAT, AND GIVE UP MY BMW?"	LOST COUNT	ZERO
Pets	GOLDEN RETRIEVER	PEDIGREED CATS	PIT BULL OR IRISH WOLF HOUND	GOLDFISH AND SNAILS

*Dressing styles of traditional preppies—madras plaid skirts, pants and shorts coupled with solid Izod® shirts of any and every hue—have been ignored for the sake of simplicity.

fication of engineers with nerds than with yuppies or jocks, primarily due to technical interests, conservative nature and lack of "savoir faire." And yet, with more and more engineers marrying engineers (or other professionals) and becoming "DINK"s—double income, no kids—many young engineers are crossing over into the "yuppie" stereotype. Overall, this portrait of an engineer seems to represent the average conservative middle class family-oriented person—not quite the aspiring business tycoon/yuppie.

So how to avoid a nerd stereotype? That really depends on what your peer group is. At the university, you are probably being compared with liberal arts majors, while in industry it may be other engineers. Here are a few observations that may be of interest.

1) Members of sororities and fraternities have their own image problems and stereotypes, but nerd is generally not one of them. If you look like a member of this type of social organization, you probably don't have a visual image problem. 2) Stereotypes are applied as people perceive you. So if you're involved in a lot of interesting hobbies and talk about them, people know that you aren't a one-dimensional person. 3) The "nerd" image tends to be that of a loner, wrapped up in his technical world, away from and disinterested in other people. It's hard to come across as being "wrapped up in your own little world" if you're genuinely interested in other people and show it.

Do engineers have a nerd image? As students, maybe, although physics

majors fit the image better, I think. The major difference between engineers and nerds appears to be that engineers eventually marry and have children. Nerds never grow up. Of course, my opinion doesn't count. That's like asking the sample how it's perceived outside the sample—you don't do it if you want valid results. Ask a law student instead.

About the author

Marsha Tufft has a B.S.M.E from Purdue University and a M.S.As.E. from the University of Cincinnati. She is currently employed at GE Aircraft Engines, where she is working on F101/F110 Engine Structural Integrity Programs. She has also served as a supervisor for the Advanced Courses in Engineering since 1984.