

A LINE ON LIFE

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ANDROGYNY: Masculine & Feminine

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Our gender roles effect almost every aspect of our lives, but few of us spend much time thinking about them. If a man cries at times, is he less masculine? If a woman tries to assert herself, is she less feminine? In most cultures, there are distinct roles for men and women. However, the roles vary from culture to culture.

In the United States, there is a consensus on the **stereotyped roles** for the average man or woman. The traits in these stereotypes fall into two separate groups. The first expresses competence and independence, while the second focuses on warmth and expressiveness. Men are seen as having the **competence** traits, while women are seen as more **expressive**. Some of these traits are shown below.

Feminine	Masculine
tactful	aggressive
quiet	independent
aware of feelings of others	dominant
need for security	competitive
easily express tender feelings	active
-	ambitious
-	make decisions easily

Some agree that competency and expressiveness are different, but equally favorable traits. However, **competency (masculine) traits** are valued more in Western societies. In contrast, **expressive (feminine) traits** are viewed negatively.

Gender role stereotyping is common even among mental health professionals. In 1970, 79 practicing psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and social workers participated in a psychological study. They were asked to describe traits of three types of people — a *normal adult male*, a *normal adult female*, and a *normal adult person* (sex not specified). These clinicians were asked to characterize the healthy, mature, socially competent person in each category. Male and female clinicians saw both the healthy male and the healthy person in nearly the same way. Both were described by traits in the competency

category. However, the healthy female was seen much differently. She was labeled as more submissive, more concerned about her appearance, and more excitable in minor crises. This set of traits matched those of an *immature person*! So clinicians — even women clinicians — share this sexist bias.

In 1974, a Stanford University psychologist, **Sandra Bem**, developed the concept of **androgyny** (pronounced "an-DROJ-ih-nee"). "Andro-" means "man," and "gyn-" refers to "woman." Bem does not view femininity and masculinity at opposite poles of a continuum. In other words, if you are high in masculine traits, you are not automatically low in feminine traits. The androgynous person is high in both masculine and feminine traits. Androgynous people can be aggressive or yielding, forceful or gentle, sensitive or assertive — *as the particular situation requires*.

For those who are androgynous, the key seems to be "adaptability."

Usually, bright or creative people tend to be androgynous. Androgynous people are more adaptable. They behave in ways appropriate to the given situation — regardless of whether the behavior is masculine or feminine. For example, when subjected to group pressures, androgynous women are more assertive and independent than feminine women.

Likewise, androgynous men are more nurturant than masculine men. Androgynous men feel more comfortable holding, touching and playing with babies. They are more able to show empathy and offer support to others.

Stereotyped masculine men are typically unresponsive in these situations. Rigid, stereotyped sex roles seriously restrict behavior. Masculine men have great difficulty in expressing warmth, playfulness and concern. They believe that expressing "feminine" traits will make them seem like "sissies" or negate their "macho" image.

Likewise, feminine women have trouble being independent and assertive — even when independence and assertiveness are needed. In contrast, choosing from a wider range of behaviors, truly androgynous people are able to modify their responses — according to their needs and the needs of the situation. Bem believes that androgynous people are freer, more adaptable and more emotionally healthy than those who restrict their behavior to traditional sex roles.

Some may not agree with her. Even so, men can be tender without losing their "macho." Likewise, women can speak up for their rights without losing their femininity. Essentially, anyone's behavior can be determined by their individual humanity or the demands of the situation — not merely by the restrictive roles of masculinity or femininity.

