

A LINE ON LIFE

4/27/97

The Definition of Manhood *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

For most men, their **masculine self-image** is linked to their job. With the feminist movement, this masculine image has changed. The image of the man as chief financial provider for the family has faded. Two-income households have become the rule rather than the exception. Women are taking many of new, high-growth jobs appearing in the market place. In contrast, many traditionally masculine jobs – footwear production and ship-building – are in decline.

Some people hail this change as a positive development, because it leads to changing family dynamics with more equity within families. Others predict serious changes in the way men view themselves.



Many men – especially older ones – have been raised to see themselves as chief breadwinners for their families. Now they are more likely to be pushed into new roles – subordinate wage earner and involved parent. Some men resist this change, advocating the traditional, stereotyped masculine role. Of course, older men are most likely to support this position.

It is unlikely that the situation will return to what it was previously. If the fifty million women in the work force quit their jobs, our economy would deteriorate drastically.

According to a September 28, 1996, article in *The Economist*, men face an identity crisis when they lose their jobs. It creates the impression that their economic and social status is deteriorating. Since more employed men are married than those who are unemployed, it

suggests that they are less attractive as marriage partners. The article labels men as "*tomorrow's second sex*." Men are trapped in a declining job market. However, most don't want to do "*women's work*" to be employed. For one reason, many of these jobs – especially residential care, daycare and health services – pay poorly.

Psychologist Gary Brooks views men as **thinking hierarchically** – they try to outdo others. According to Brooks:

"That's where we fit with the people around us, whether above or below on the ladder. It's particularly difficult to think that way when you're low on the totem pole."

**Rather than blindly following a set of norms,
children need to be trained to question
the variety of standards that surround them.**

In previous generations, only males were socialized to be aggressive and assertive on the job. Currently in our schools, more boys and girls are being trained to be assertive. This makes it less likely that younger people will have trouble adapting to changes, including those in the workplace. In addition, many boys are

being raised by working mothers, providing them with a broader perspective of adult gender roles. Some men are happy to abandon some of the role of provider with all of its pressures. They still have a masculine role, but it is more varied.

Brooks also notes a less progressive trend. In TV and movies, role models are more likely to encourage the old, stereotyped masculine code. For every role of "Mr. Mom," there are dozens of "shoot-'em up" models for males. To Brooks, this promotes a double standard.

"The most desirable women go to the highly functioning, successful guys. Men are taught they have to compete to be successful."



There is a conflict between different concepts of masculinity. The old code does not match with the reality of changes in both the job and home. Eventually, a new code of masculinity will arise, partially due to job-difficulties men are currently experiencing. However, not all men will be affected the same way.

This issue will effect high-earning men differently than working-class men. College-educated men are more likely to seek professional counseling. This is less likely for blue-collar workers. Even though blue-collar workers feel the effects of down-sizing as much as white-collar men, they lack college degrees and employment honors that boost their sense of worth. Another aspect is noted by Brooks.

"With blue collar guys, it's a day-to-day affirmation kind of thing. On a daily basis, you're supposed to sweat and use your muscles. It's a first hand, visceral relationship with work."

Besides down-sizing, there is another trend that threatens men. The job market is being invaded by "super-women." They are highly educated, professional women who are capable of juggling their job and family responsibilities. In 1995, data indicated that 55% of women who work provide the majority of their family income. Although men pay "lip service" to marital equality, on average, they do only about one-third of household chores. Because the women believe "they're doing everything," they will come to resent these less competent men.

Another psychologist, Roberta Nutt, related the loss of masculine role to viability.

"It's really threatening to men when the role of provider is gone. Think of all the literature on men who die within a year of retirement. There's evidence that the role is important."

As the second millennium is ending, the gender roles for both men and women are changing. The old roles are fading, and new ones are developing. Are we going to train our children for the roles of yesteryear, or will we train them to be assertive and adaptable to face the roles that will develop?

* Adapted from Nathan Seppa's "What defines a man today?," [*The APA Monitor*](#), March, 1997, pages 1, 12.