

# MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

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What do the words masculine and feminine mean? Marcel Proust's traits in his book *Remembrance of Things Past* (1934) suggest some possibilities. Femininity (the opposite of masculinity?) consists of emotional sensitivity; artistic sensibility; a focus on manners; a tendency to timidity and non-aggressiveness; a nurturant, attached orientation to others; and sexual attraction to men. Admittedly, all of these feminine characteristics are stereotypic. They reflect an essentialist view of femininity, that there are core qualities to femininity, a Platonic essence if you will, which exist despite cultural and historical variations. To research psychologists, the concepts of masculinity and femininity have referred to individual differences (i.e., variations) in people's gender-related traits and behaviours, variations that exist within each sex. Masculinity and femininity refer to those aspects of gender that vary among men and among women. Chapter 1 considered the question: How much do men and women differ? We turn now to the second key question related to gender: How do men vary in their masculinity, and how do women vary in their femininity?

Research on masculinity and femininity has a long, complex, and controversial history. This may be due in part to the questions addressed. Do masculinity and femininity really exist, and if so, how are they best defined and measured? What causes people's masculinity and femininity to vary: biological factors, parental rearing, or social and cultural learning? Are masculinity and femininity essential traits of the individual, that is, are they fixed traits that exist inside of people? Or are they social constructions, arbitrary concepts foisted upon us by sexist societies? A central question for us is: What moulds and determines a person's degree of masculinity and femininity: nature or nurture?

Because the roles of men and women have been the subject of passionate debate in recent years, it is no wonder that masculinity and femininity research has become embroiled in the debate. On one hand, if masculinity and femininity are real traits—perhaps even genetically determined to a significant extent—then gender would seem to be partly wired into us. On the other hand, if masculinity and femininity are social constructions—learned patterns of behavior that are culturally and historically variable—then existing gender roles may be malleable and subject to liberating alternatives. What in fact does science tell us about masculinity and femininity? To understand research on masculinity and femininity it helps to begin at the beginning, in Palo Alto, California, in the 1920s.

## **The Search Commences**

During the 1920s, Terman started a classic study of gifted children, in which he identified 856 boys and 672 girls with high IQs in order to trace their social and intellectual development over time. Terman observed that, despite their shared high intelligence, the gifted boys displayed quite different patterns of interests from the gifted girls. Terman reasoned that such sex differences might serve as a means to measure variations in psychological masculinity and femininity within each sex. Terman proposed that, like intelligence, masculinity–femininity (M–F) was a trait that could be measured through an

appropriately designed test. Just as IQ tests provided an objective means to assess intelligence, Terman hoped that his M–F test might “enable the clinician or other investigator to obtain a more exact and meaningful, as well as a more objective, rating of those aspects of personality in which the sexes tend to differ” (Terman & Miles, 1936, p. 6). What was the way to determine whether an item measured a person’s masculinity–femininity? (Think of an item here as a question on a self-report questionnaire: for example, “True or False: I like to watch football games.”) Terman and Miles proposed that a given question could serve as a measure of M–F if large groups of men and women (or boys and girls) responded to the statement differently, on average. If many more men than women, for example, responded “true” to the statement, “I like to watch football games,” then Terman and Miles considered this item to measure M–F, with a true response indicating masculinity and a false response indicating femininity. In contrast, if about equal numbers of men and women answered true to a question (e.g., “I like to go to movies”), then the researchers considered that question to be unrelated to M–F.

In 1936 Lewis Terman and Catharine Cox Miles began the modern study of masculinity and femininity with the publication of a classic book, *Sex and Personality*. In their book Terman and Miles presented both a method for measuring masculinity–femininity and a decade’s worth of research investigating masculinity–femininity. Terman and Miles’s conception of M–F provided the conceptual framework for many subsequent researchers. One noteworthy example was Edward Strong—a colleague of Terman’s at Stanford University—who developed one of the first occupational interest tests, the Strong Vocational Interest Blank, which, in updated forms, is still used today (Campbell, 1971; Strong, 1936, 1943). People taking this test are asked to rate how much they like or dislike various occupations and hobbies (e.g., farming, sewing) and how interested they are in taking various school subjects (e.g., geometry, English). Based on his research, Strong came to believe that M–F constituted a major dimension underlying occupational preferences. Accordingly, he developed a M–F scale for his test. What determined if an occupational preference item was placed on Strong’s M–F scale? Like Terman and Miles, Strong selected items for his M–F scale that showed large and statistically significant (i.e., not due to chance) sex differences. If many more men than women expressed an interest in being a farmer and a race car driver, for example, then these items would be placed on the M–F scale, keyed in the masculine direction. Conversely, if many more women than men expressed an interest in being an elementary school teacher and librarian, then these items would be placed on the M–F scale, keyed in the feminine direction. When Strong gave his M–F scale and the Terman and Miles M–F test to the same group of people, he found only a weak correlation between people’s scores on the two tests. This early piece of evidence hinted that various M–F scales were not always measuring the same thing.

The Guilford-Zimmerman scale of masculinity (which, by the bipolar assumption, is the opposite of femininity) assessed inhibited emotional expression, male-typical vocational interests, and a cluster of so-called masculine emotional traits (not being easily disgusted, fearlessness, and a lack of sympathy). The California Psychological Inventory (CPI) was developed to embody folk concepts of personality, that is, dimensions of personality that

make sense to lay people. The CPI M–F scale, which was labelled the Fe (femininity) scale, assessed sensitivity, the ability to perceive the nuances of social interaction, acquiescence, compassion, niceness, female-typical work and interests, and lack of interest in politics and social issues. According to this conceptualization, the feminine individual is portrayed as nice, but rather passive, unengaged, and dependent, whereas the masculine individual is somewhat disagreeable, but active, engaged, and independent.

The MMPI is perhaps the best known clinical personality inventory in use. Since its inception in the 1930s and 1940s, the MMPI has been used to diagnose mental illness. Indeed, many of the scales of the MMPI are labeled by the kind of mental illness they are meant to measure and predict (e.g., depression, paranoia, hypochondriasis). As a result, the developers of the MMPI approached the measurement of M–F from the vantage point of psychopathology. In particular, they were interested in masculinity–femininity as a means of diagnosing gender identity disturbances and sexual inversion (i.e., the kind of homosexuality shown by men who act like women or by women who act like men).

### **What is Masculinity-Femininity Related to?**

Terman and Miles investigated additional factors that were linked to M–F. They found, for example, that M–F was somewhat age-related, with individuals—particularly males—showing their highest levels of masculinity in their late teens and early 20s. Not surprisingly M–F was related to people’s interests and academic pursuits. Masculine men tended to be more interested in science and mechanical things and feminine men in cultural pursuits and the arts. Among high school and college aged women, masculinity was found to be associated with broad interests, high levels of education, and intellectuality. In other words, for women, masculinity was associated with intellectual and educational accomplishment, and if we wanted to place a value judgment on these findings, we might conclude that in this regard, masculinity is good for women.

Later research extended and replicated these early results, indicating that feminine boys and masculine girls tend to show higher levels of creativity, scholastic achievement, and giftedness than more sex-typed children do (Lippa, 1998a; Lubinski & Humphreys, 1990; Maccoby, 1966). (Sex-typed children are those whose traits and behaviours are stereotypic for their sex.) Thus, in terms of creativity and intellectual achievement, femininity can be considered good for boys and masculinity good for girls. Research on M–F and sexual orientation points to an unstated, if implicit, value judgment that permeated early research on masculinity/femininity, that it is good for people to score in gender-appropriate ways. If you are a man, it’s good to be masculine; and if you are a woman, it’s good to be feminine. This assumption reflected psychological dogma common throughout the middle part of the 20th century. Developmental psychologists of that period earnestly studied gender socialization and sex typing, the ways in which children learn supposedly appropriate gender roles and behaviors from their parents and from society (Huston, 1983).

But you may recall one set of findings that challenged this assumption, namely, the data that linked boys' femininity and girls' masculinity to creativity and scholastic achievement. In the 1950s and 1960s, other evidence raised additional questions about whether extreme masculinity is necessarily ideal for males or extreme femininity ideal for females. For example, some studies showed that femininity in women was often associated with anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and meekness, and masculinity in boys and men was associated with aggressiveness and acting out. Eleanor Maccoby (1966), a respected Stanford University developmental psychologist, hypothesized that highly masculine boys might be overly impulsive, whereas highly feminine girls might be over-controlled, meek, and unassertive. In other words, masculinity in boys and femininity in girls may not be so desirable after all.

### **Masculinity and Femininity as Separate Dimensions**

By the early 1970s, the concept of bipolar M–F was beginning to show its age, and attitudes toward gender were changing dramatically. In the era of Women's Liberation, psychologists began to rethink what they meant by masculinity and femininity. After assembling all the evidence, psychologist Constantinople asked, in essence: Is a trait that is diffuse, multi-dimensional, and linked to a host of demographic factors truly a coherent personality trait? Or is it really just a conceptual mess, which should be abandoned by psychologists?

### **The Rise of Agentic and Expressive Traits**

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the beginning of the modern Women's Movement. In this turbulent time of civil rights demonstrations and anti-war protests, feminist scholars offered devastating critiques of society's gender roles and began a process, which continues to this day, of identifying pervasive biases against girls and women in the worlds of education, government, and work. With the changing times came new views of masculinity and femininity. Drawing upon the work of Constantinople and others, Stanford psychologist Sandra Bern (1974) (now at Cornell University), combined feminist values with empirical research to create a dramatically new approach to masculinity and femininity. The old bipolar approach had viewed masculinity and femininity as opposites, whereas Bern argued that they were instead separate and independent dimensions. And whereas the older M–F scales included motley collections of items that men and women answered differently, Bern focused her attention on a more limited domain, items that assessed gender-stereotypic personality traits.

Beginning in the 1950s, sociologists and social psychologists had noted that one set of personality traits—labelled **as instrumental or agentic traits**—is more associated with men, whereas another set—labelled **as expressive or communal traits**—is more associated with women (Bakan, 1966; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Instrumental traits, on the one hand, are goal-oriented, focused on the external world of work, and getting the job done. Examples of such traits are independence, assertiveness, dominance, and leadership ability. Expressive traits, on the other hand, are people-oriented, focused more on the private worlds of family and personal relationships; they are related to people's desire to nurture others and establish intimacy. Examples are warmth, sympathy, compassion, and sensitivity to others.

Bern (1974) drew upon this existing distinction between instrumental and expressive traits when she developed a new test—the Bern Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI)—which measured masculinity (M) and femininity (F) as two separate dimensions.

At about the time that Bern developed her inventory at Stanford, a group of researchers at the University of Texas at Austin—Janet Spence, Bob Helmreich, and Joy Stapp (1974)—developed a similar test called the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (or PAQ for short). The PAQ masculinity items comprise **socially desirable personality traits that are stereotypically judged to be more true of men than women (e.g., aggressive, independent, competitive, never gives up easily)**, and the femininity items comprise **socially desirable personality traits that are judged to be more true of women than men (e.g., emotional, gentle, kind, very understanding of others)**.

People who are high on M but low on F were considered to be **stereotypically masculine**. These people report that they are **independent and dominant**, for example, but **not kind or compassionate**. People who are high on F but low on M were considered to be **stereotypically feminine (e.g., kind and compassionate, but not independent or dominant)**. However, there are additional possibilities. People can be high on both M and F (e.g., **independent and dominant, and kind and compassionate**). **Bern labelled such people androgynous (i.e., having both male and female characteristics**; from the Greek roots andro [male] and gyn [female]). Finally, people could score low on both M and F. In the research literature, such low-low individuals are referred to as undifferentiated. Bern argued that androgynous individuals might serve to define a new standard of mental health and adjustment. According to her, stereotypically masculine people (high-M, low-F individuals, usually men) and stereotypically feminine people (high-F, low-M individuals, usually women) are restricted by their gender roles. Masculine men may do well at instrumental tasks (e.g., being assertive); however, they may fail at expressive tasks (e.g., being nurturant). Conversely, feminine women may do well at expressive tasks but fail at instrumental tasks. Androgynous individuals, however, can be flexibly masculine or feminine, depending on the situation. Thus the androgynous person can be an assertive and forceful boss at work and a tender and supportive parent at home. The androgynous person has the best of both worlds. Bern found that *stereotypically feminine people showed relatively high levels of conformity, whereas masculine and androgynous people showed lower levels. Bern concluded that masculine and androgynous people showed what she considered good behaviour (they stood up for what they believed in), whereas feminine people showed less admirable behaviour (they caved in to group pressure)*.