

Changing gender roles in the American work place

One of the most basic items when considering gender roles or feminist / masculine perspectives is that it has absolutely nothing to with biological sex (or sexual preference). Indeed, it would have been better in hind sight if masculine and feminine had not been used but rather some neutral term such as type J and type K. It was observed by one [woman] writer “My sex was determined at the moment of my conception but I have spent a lifetime developing my gender.” Gender, in the sense that it will be used here, is how an individual perceives and reacts to life situations. Most of us have some feelings or opinions about appropriate ways to act and behave as humans, and more specifically as male / female humans. This is to say that the expected behavior, which is observable, and the attitudes, which must be attributed based on the behavior, differs in many cases considerably between males and females in exactly the same situation.

While it can be dismissed as stereotyping, in the past most jobs outside the home were held by males, and the conditions of labor were generally dangerous, dirty, noisy, messy, and involved heavy lifting. The more that a job was safe, clean, quiet, neat, and low exertion the more it was considered a feminine occupation. For several reasons the “male” occupations, that is the ones that are dangerous, dirty, noisy, messy, and involve heavy lifting, are rapidly disappearing from the American economy. Without any attempt to rank, some direct and overt causes include: (1) the loss to foreign countries, or elimination by automation, of many heavy industry and manufacturing jobs which tended to be “male”; (2) Legal pressure by OSHA and other health / safety agencies to force

improvements; (3) Desire for cost avoidance by the employing organization, for example limiting the number and severity of on the job accidents, or hunting for “lost” tools and fixtures; (4) Desire for profit improvements by the employing organization through the increased productivity which typically results from improvements in these areas, and; (5) a shift to service occupations which by their nature require a much more feminine response pattern because of the greatly increased interpersonal interactions required, especially those with the [paying] customers.

There are also less overt and more subtle causes. To examine these causes it would be useful to have some generally agreed on descriptors for masculine and feminine gender characteristics. Fortunately such a list has been developed and validated over many years of clinical use. Bem in the Bem Sex-Role Inventory has identified a number of descriptors. We need to consider only the most characteristic of these for this analysis so only the top 20 in each category are listed. These descriptors are listed in order of decreasing correlation coefficients. That is the most common or highest rated traits are “Has Leadership Abilities” for the masculine gender, and “Gentle” for the female gender. A more complete discussion of the statistical methodology used is contained in the Professional Manual for the “Bem Sex-Role Inventory.” *It should be noted that these descriptors were developed in the early to mid 1970s using typical American subjects of that time and this should be considered before using these descriptors in a critical situation, particularly if cross-cultural evaluation is required. Significant shifts in perception may also have occurred because of the “new” generations which were either coming of age or being born at the time this study was performed.*

It should be noted that almost all the English phrases used to identify these traits have a number of alternative constructions which can have laudatory / positive, neutral, or pejorative / negative connotations. It is instructive to note that a quick scan of the “top 20” indicates that while all the masculine descriptors or traits are laudatory /positive, a number of the feminine traits use the pejorative / negative form. For example, Feminine trait #15 “gullible” can also be expressed as “Willing to try new methods and procedures,” #16 “Yielding” can be expressed as “Flexible and Adaptable,” and #18 “Flatterable” can also be characterized as “Accepts and acts on praise.” [These phrases are taken directly from a salary exempt annual evaluation form (fitness report) used by a Fortune 500 corporation.] Arbitrarily selecting the same number masculine traits we have #15 “Ambitious” which can alternatively be characterized as “greedy and power-hungry,” #16 “Self-reliant” which pejoratively is “egocentric and selfish,” and #18 “Athletic” which can be negatively expressed as “Vain or excessively concerned about physical appearance” or even more pejoratively as “desires to physically intimidate.”

Extracts from table 9 and 10 [Bem 13]

Masculine traits in rank order highest to lowest	Feminine traits in rank order
Has leadership abilities	Gentle
Acts as a leader	Tender
Assertive	Compassionate
Dominant	Warm
Strong Personality	Sympathetic
Forceful	Sensitive to the needs of others
Aggressive	Eager to soothe hurt feelings
Willing to take a stand	Understanding
Independent	Affectionate
Defends own beliefs	Cheerful
Willing to take risks	Loves children
Individualistic	Does not use harsh language
Self-sufficient	Loyal
Makes decisions easily	Feminine
Ambitious	Gullible
Self-reliant	Yielding
Competitive	Soft-spoken
Athletic	Flatterable
Masculine	Child-like
Analytical	Shy

Above table transliterated into a possible feminine version (by a male)

Bem Feminine traits	A possible Feminine version of these Bem's Feminine traits
Gentle	Promotes long term relationships and sustainable operations.
Tender	Avoids "tunnel vision" Considers needs of others and long term effects as well as the immediate organizational needs / mission.
Compassionate	Able to balance own and others' personal needs with those of the organization / group.
Warm	Able to act as a human being
Sympathetic	Makes an effort to see others' view points and perceptions
Sensitive to the needs of others	Sensitive to the needs of others
Eager to soothe hurt feelings	Promotes teamwork and loyalty
Understanding	Makes an effort to see the "big picture" -- takes a holistic view of situations
Affectionate	Forms "real" relationships with others
Cheerful	Emphasizes positive aspects
Loves children	Integrates all aspects of personality
Does not use harsh language	Avoids unnecessary friction / confrontations
Loyal	Dependable and honest
Feminine	Feminine
Gullible	Open to new experiences
Yielding	Flexible
Soft-spoken	Has good people skills
Flatterable	Responds to positive reinforcement
Child-like	Willing to take instructions and advice
Shy	Does not have to be the center of attention, makes sure others get their fair share of credit.

Bem Masculine Trait	A possible Feminine version of these Masculine traits (by a male)
Has leadership abilities	Manipulative
Acts as a leader	Likes to tell people what to do - bossy
Assertive	Loud and Abusive
Dominant	Authoritarian and Dictatorial
Strong Personality	Rude and Abrasive
Forceful	Bull in a china shop
Aggressive	Aggressive
Willing to take a stand	Stubborn
Independent	Cares more about own needs than those of the group / organization
Defends own beliefs	Trouble maker
Willing to take risks	Rash, dangerous to be around or work with
Individualistic	Self centered and egotistical
Self-sufficient	Isolated and standoffish
Makes decisions easily	Jumps to conclusions
Ambitious	Greedy and aggressive
Self-reliant	Unable to accept help even when needed, would rather fail on their own than succeed with the assistance of others, even at the expense of the group
Competitive	Always wants to be first, even when there is no need
Athletic	Macho-Jock
Masculine	Has problem with excess testosterone levels (Clinton/Kennedy syndrome)
Analytical	Unfeeling, calculating and machine-like

What has apparently not been extensively considered in the past is the extent to which *subordinates were expected to behave in and react in what would be described or considered to be typical feminine response patterns.* For example, in most large organizations, only the “leader” is “allowed” to display typical masculine attributes, such as domination and assertiveness while their subordinates are expected to exhibit characteristics such as “the ability to read between the lines,” “teamwork, that is sensitivity to the needs of others,” “loyalty,” and in the restated phrases “flexibility / adaptability,” and “willingness to try new things.” Both Jackall and Kantor have detailed the expected roles and persona in large organizations and have determined the display of “masculine” characteristics by a subordinate to be a cultural taboo, which causes the offending party to be labeled “not a team player.”

Examination of the above gender traits (and their “translations”) qua the “new” requirement [SCANS, Education 2000] for people making the school-to-work transition indicates an increasingly rapid feminization of much of the American workplace. Typical masculine traits such as assertive / aggressive behavior, competitiveness, “willingness to take a stand” and independence are all actively discouraged while typical feminine traits such as teamwork, sensitivity, openness to new experiences or ways of doing things, loyalty, and flexibility are actively encouraged.

So what is the significance of this for Vocational, Occupational and Technical Education [VOTE]?

To a large degree this depends on exactly how VOTE is defined, and thus with which socio-economic strata VOTE interacts. In the following discussion VOTE will be assumed to be post-secondary education / training which is not intended to result in a baccalaureate degree. In turn this implies that primary direct interaction will be for the most part with students and parents from the lower socio-economic strata.

[As an editorial remark, this is unfortunate because many students from the higher socio-economic strata would most likely be much happier and more productive individuals as skilled and competent carpenters, plumbers, or mechanics than as marginal accountants, programmers or teachers. The reality is that if the parents are making several times the median family income, there will be not only considerable pressure from the peer groups of both the parents and [potential] students but also considerable institutional bias from their secondary institution in that high family income generally means up-scale housing which means up-scale schools with emphasis on college prep, not a broad range of leaving strategies. Indeed, the decision by a student not to pursue a baccalaureate degree may be regarded as equivalent to a decision to “drop out” with attendant hand wringing and cries of “what did we do wrong?” by both the parents and the teachers.]

The following observations are offered without attribution in the same way that the statement “when the winter comes the weather turns cold and the days get short” does not need to be documented.

- (1) Many children and young adults lack any “real” adult role models, other than teachers, on which to base their behavior. Most “adult” behavior that they do observe is that depicted in films and TV. Because of the expansion of the typical work week to include evenings and weekends, the need for both parents to work to maintain the desired standard of living, and the general separation of the parents at work from their children, there is almost no opportunity for the students to observe, evaluate, select and practice behaviors appropriate to the workplace, or indeed anywhere other than the schoolroom as a student.
- (2) Even if the opportunity to observe, evaluate, select and practice currently appropriate behaviors was somehow available, as indicated most likely these would not be appropriate by the time the student became integrated into the workplace.
- (3) Considerable dissonance or incongruence is sure to result when the student behaves in the way that their role model(s) behaved or in the way that they were told to behave and “success” [or the expected outcome, however that is defined,] does not occur. Continued dissonance or incongruence is almost certain to result in either or both intra-personal or inter-personal problems with considerable adverse impact on both macro and micro quality-of-life and productivity factors.
- (4) The typical VOTE practitioner, especially the male, is at a considerable disadvantage because typically they have attained their expertise and position precisely because of the masculine traits such as initiative, leadership, assertiveness, dominance, independence, etc. that are now seen as more of a liability than an asset by most industries and businesses. This is a strong statement, but if you doubt this ask the personnel manager of any large company to check and see why the last 100

people were fired. Typically the (real) reasons include “not a team player,” “excessively independent,” “insensitive,” “unnecessarily aggressive,” “domineering,” “reckless,” and “disloyal.” Almost never will you see “excessively sympathetic,” “unable to reach a decision,” or “excessively suggestible,” given as a reason except at the very highest levels where, as indicated above, masculine attributes are still valued and expected. Conversation with (retired) high ranking military personnel who have served in monitor¹ positions indicates that this is becoming the norm, except in the most combat ready branches such as the Marine Corps, Naval Aviation and Ranger / Airborne units. This exception is preserved only with considerable effort and constant attention. That is personal appearance, an ability to “get along” and flexibility / adaptability are beginning to outweigh “obsolescent” characteristics such as mere competence, physical condition, initiative, hard work, loyalty and the ability to motivate and lead.

- (5) This results in a serious inconsistency or problem in that the traits apparently necessary for success in entry, low and mid-level (that is other than independent “top” management) positions in large, increasingly service based, organizations are in direct opposition to accepted male socio-economic class norms and are possibly in direct opposition to innate male socio-biological tendencies.

¹ Navy and Marine Corps “shorthand” for the people responsible for selecting and assigning personnel to open positions. In this context, the most senior command and leadership (flag rank) positions are implied.

What can / should the VOTE practitioner do?

- (1) A most difficult but necessary first step is for the practitioner to examine their own perceptions and feelings about the gender descriptors / traits and how they feel these would have an impact on or affect the “success” of their students in their particular field and in the world-of-work in general. This is difficult, not only because it is intrinsically difficult, but also because the typical VOTE male practitioner is not inclined to introspection or (re)evaluation of long-held (pre)conceptions or standards of what’s right and proper. The typical female VOTE practitioner may have less difficulty as they have already demonstrated the ability to move between the male and female perspectives and by definition have had to select the attributes and traits necessary for “success.” A difficulty for many practitioners will be separation of “would” and “should.” As appealing as many of the masculine traits such as “willing to take risks,” “willing to take a stand,” “competitive,” and “makes decisions easily” may be (at least to the males) these must be evaluated as to their probable outcomes on “success” if internalized and practiced by the students qua their likely field of employment and probable extant conditions. This is especially true if their selected occupation implies a high likelihood of employment in a large monolithically organization.
- (2) Unavoidably a problem which most practitioners would like to avoid becomes central at this point – that is ethics. One possible course of action is for the practitioner to describe in explicit detail what traits and characteristics appear to be necessary for, or are highly correlated with, “success” in a particular trade or occupation and allow the student to decide if they are willing to adapt, adopt and

emphasize these traits. Most likely it should also be made explicit that certain characteristics which may be highly beneficial or vital to a self-employed contractor or entrepreneur may be totally inappropriate and self-defeating for an employee in a large organization. Conversely certain characteristics which may be highly beneficial or vital to the success and advancement of a long term employee of a large service based organization may be totally inappropriate for a self-employed contractor or entrepreneur. These traits may be, and most likely are, more important than technical competency above some minimally acceptable level. Jackall in his study of operations and interactions within large American organizations makes this point for middle and high level management positions, when he observes that technical competency is taken as a given. It seems reasonable to extend this to all but the lowest level operational and entry level positions. Indeed, with the increasing shift to service based organizations, “technical competency” is becoming increasingly difficult to define and quantify. This has resulted in increasingly abstract measurement criteria. Clearly, in the traditional manufacturing context, if operator A produces twice as many acceptable (identical) parts as operator B does in the same amount of time, that operator A is most likely not only working harder than operator B but is also more technically qualified. It is much less clear if Customer Service Representative A processes twice calls as Customer Service Representative B that A is working any harder or has any more technical knowledge than B. It could be that B is resolving more complex problems and has a more extensive technical knowledge than A, for

example B may be using multiple computer systems to correct a problem which A is unable to do.

- (3) The most important single item for the practitioner to remember is that the optimal mix of male / female traits for typical students, especially those that will be employed by large organizations, appears to be continually shifting to the female end of the spectrum. This is a statement of fact and not of (researcher) desirability.
- (4) Another item of importance is the rapidly converging median male and female incomes which are projected to be equal in 2004. After this time the median female income is projected to exceed the male median income. The social impact of this, which implies the primary bread-winner or income for the family unit is increasingly the female, is most likely significant. Both male and female learners should be made aware of this and some of the affects this may have on the typical working class male / female relationship such as who makes the final decision and who moves to obtain a promotion.