What Do "Masculine" and "Feminine" Mean in Everyday Usage?

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Introduction

The concepts of masculinity and femininity are of considerable interest to both psychologists and lay people. This interest probably arises, in both instances, from the fact that these terms refer to widespread stereotypes that are held about males and females in our society and that for many these are prescriptive and give information as to what we expect of both others and ourselves.

In recent years there has been considerably conceptual reanalysis of the concepts of masculinity and femininity. As a result of this it is generally agreed that these are not polar opposites but separate continua. Further, there is increasing awareness that both concepts are multidimensional in nature although there is little agreement as to what the dimensions are, or should be. Kagan (5) suggested that the core attributes of masculinity and femininity included three classes: physical attributes; overt behaviors; and covert attributes which include such things as feelings, attitudes, and motives. Perhaps the most elaborate system for conceptualizing masculinity and femininity has been devised by Huston (3). She described a 20 cell matrix with five content areas (these include biological gender, activities and interests, personal-social attributes, gender-based social relationships, and stylistic and symbolic content) and four construct areas (these include conceptual knowledge about sex-typed content, self perception of these sex-typed attributes, preference or values attached to attributes for self or others, and behavioral enactment of sex-typed attributes). Within this matrix it is clear that a majority of work on sex roles in young children has been done using activities and interests while that with adults has typically used personal-social attributes. The most common construct area for adults has probably been that of self-perception although some investigators have also considered preference or values. Research with children has investigated primarily preference or values with some work on conceptual knowledge. One recent research program (7) has begun to ask whether or not, in adults, there is a correlation between perceived attributes with respect to personal-social attributes and preference for behaviors and occupations. The results suggest that there is value in considering separately the various aspects of sex roles although there is a reasonable correlation between the different domains.

While the above discussions appear to be concerned with an analysis of what sex roles could or should mean, a number of scholars in this field have made generalizations about what the terms mean to non-psychologists. The following examples are taken from undergraduate texts in sex roles or the psychology of women. It seems likely, as Hyde (4) suggests, that "most of us have a sense—perhaps not well thought out—of what characteristics make a man "masculine" or a woman "feminine" (p. 90). Kaplan and Sidney (6) specifically suggest that "In common parlance, of course, 'masculine' implies 'acting like a man' and 'feminine' implies 'acting like a woman' ";

they further suggest that we think of these terms "as labels that are used for people's expectations about the behavior of women and men". Richmond-Abbott (8) appears to concur with this emphasis upon behavior as a determinant of masculinity/feminity when she suggested "As we have seen, people are defined as masculine or feminine by the tasks they perform". An alternate suggestion has been made by some. Brooks-Gunn and Matthews (1), for example, suggest that "We commonly describe ourselves and others in terms of personality traits . . . those we associate with the male sex role are labeled masculine; those we associate with the female sex role are labeled feminine." The authors also refer to a "constellation of qualities" which are understood to characterize either a masculine sex role or a feminine sex role and note that "Physical attributes account for only a small portion of the constellation while social or culturally determined attributes account for a great deal".

Apparently disparate views from scholars in the field are possible because while there has been considerable conceptual analysis by psychologists of what the concepts of masculinity and femininity should mean for theoreticians and researchers, there is little empirical data concerned with what these concepts in fact do mean to most people. Some information has been offered by Deaux and Lewis (2) who refer to a preliminary study with a small number of subjects. They attempted to learn what associations were made by subjects to the terms feminine, masculine, male sex role, and female sex role. The obtained responses were grouped into a number of logical categories. There were no sex differences. About 2/3 of the responses to masculinity and femininity were categorized as personality traits while about 1/4 of the responses were related to physical appearance. The responses in the category of behavior, occupations, and activities comprised no more than 2% of the total.

Janet Spence and Linda Sawin have also reported (9) some research concerned with adult conceptions of masculinity and femininity. They interviewed Texas residents who were both married and parents. About 1/3 of these were college graduates and another 1/3 had attended college. They asked ". . . when you think of a very feminine woman/masculine man, what kinds of characteristics does it bring to mind?" Forty-two men and 41 women were interviewed. With respect to femininity, about 45% of the men first mentioned a physical characteristic and 64% mentioned physical attributes. The percentages were even higher for women, 54% of whom first mentioned a physical attribute and 83% of whom mentioned it at least once. While physical attributes were the most frequent characteristics mentioned for masculinity, the proportion was greater for femininity. Specifically, 29% of men and 43% of women first mentioned a physical attribute and 60 and 68% eventually mentioned one. That is, the most commonly mentioned image of both masculinity and femininity was a physical attribute. This phenomenon occurred even more for female respondents than for male respondents and were more likely for femininity than for masculinity. Interestingly, when asked about their own self-images as to what defined their masculinity or femininity, results were very different with about 1/4 of both sexes first replying that they did not know. However, the largest single category had to do with their roles, with women mentioning being either a wife or mother and men mentioning the provider role.

The present research was designed to explore further the nature of the concepts "masculine" and "feminine" as used in everyday conversation. Specifically, we wondered what these terms connoted to young adults, and we conducted two highly similar studies dealing with this question.

A total of 480 undergraduates at a large midwestern public university served as respondents. All were enrolled in a Child Psychology elective course for which this was an optional assignment. The assignment was made and completed prior to the course considerations of the topic of masculinity/femininity. Participating subjects were given a sheet of paper with instructions at the top. For both studies the instructions

began as follows: "We want to find out the characteristics that you feel are common to (masculinity) (femininity). Think about the attributes or characteristics that make someone (masculine) (feminine) in your view. You may wish to think of two or three people that you would describe as ("masculine") ("feminine").

The first study then continued: Is this because they are brown-haired? Reliable? Stay up late? The second study had a different order of examples and asked: Is this because they are reliable? Stay up late? Are brown-haired? Respondents were then provided lines on which to generate a word or phrase. In both studies respondents answered either for masculine or for feminine but not both.

Only up to 10 responses were analyzed. Each response was placed into one of the following five categories: physical attributes, psychological traits, overt behaviors, occupation or role, and other. Extensive examples of each of these categories were written out and made available to student coders. We have used both graduate and undergraduate student coders. After a short period of training, pairs of student coders have had reliabilities ranging from 90 to 98%. The data reported in this article were coded by a female graduate student.

Analysis of variance revealed that there were no sex differences and so the responses for the sexes were combined. There was an effect of instructions with physical attributes occurring more often when the first example was "brown-haired" and with psychological traits occurring more often when the first example was "reliable." Table I shows the distribution of responses in the 4 categories for the two concepts, masculine and feminine, for the two studies combined as well as for the sexes combined. The most frequently used category was that of physical attributes. Typical responses for men included muscular, big, and good-looking. It is possible that the number of physical responses for men should be even greater but there were some frequently used respones that are ambiguous and so were classified as "other"—these included such words as strong and tough, which could refer either to physical strength or psychological strength. Petite, dainty, good figure were frequent responses for feminine with such things as perfume, jewelry, and curly hair also frequently mentioned. Words such as weak were classified as "other" since they could refer either to physical or psychological weaknesses.

The second largest category for both concepts is psychological traits with about ⅓ of the responses falling into this category. This finding is in clear opposition to those reported by Deaux and Lewis (2) who used respondents (slightly more than 30) from the same undergraduate institution. Since their question was embedded in a larger context, perhaps here is another situation in which the context and exact instructions make a difference.

Behaviors accounted for 15% of responses in each category while occupational responses and roles accounted for far less. It does appear that while occupations and roles do not figure largely in either masculinity or femininity, they are mentioned more for masculine than feminine—a finding in line with the general finding that more emphasis is placed on occupational role for men than for women.

To summarize: In contrast to the usual emphasis in theory and the approach used in research, it appears that in everyday usage the concepts of masculinity and femininity refer to a considerable degree to physical attributes. This finding may be restricted to our images or concepts when thinking of someone else, rather than when thinking of ourselves if the findings of Spence and Sawin (9) are accurate. They showed that self-descriptions focused on occupations and roles while descriptions of others focused on physical attributes. It is also possible that as we do achieve a more egalitarian society in which there is a de-emphasis upon sex-typing of behavior and personality traits, we may find an increasing emphasis on the importance attributed to physical signs of differentiation between the sexes.

Acknowledgment

TABLE 1.   Classification of Responses

	"Masculinity"	"Feminine"
Physical Attribute	41%	50%
Trait	36	32
Behavior	15	15
Occupation	7	2
Other	2	1

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