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The Use of *Masculine* and *Feminine* to Describe Women's and Men's Behavior

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ABSTRACT. The hypothesis that the terms *masculine* and *feminine* would not have the same connotations as the personality traits that are typically associated with them was investigated. Two hundred five undergraduates (116 women and 89 men) at a U.S. university rated how much they expected to like various hypothetical women and men, each of whom was described by a single trait adjective. Ten instrumental-trait and 10 socioemotional-trait adjectives, including the terms masculine and feminine, were associated with a targeted female or male character (e.g., "an independent woman" or "an understanding man"). Although "a masculine woman" and "a feminine man" both received low ratings, female targets described by instrumental adjectives and male targets described by socioemotional adjectives received high ratings. Nonstereotypic characters were rated more positively by the female respondents than they were by the male respondents. Stereotypic targets were rated more positively by other-gender respondents than by same-gender respondents.

THE ADJECTIVES *masculine* and *feminine* have been defined in terms of specific traits by researchers and laypersons alike. For example, Spence and Helmreich (1978) wrote, "The core properties of femininity, we propose, can be usefully labeled or conceptualized as a sense of communion and the core properties of masculinity as a sense of agency" (p. 18). Researchers studying gender stereotypes have also examined laypersons' working definitions of masculine and feminine. Whereas people's stereotypes of so-called masculine traits typically encompass instrumental or agentic characteristics, such as independence, confidence, and assertiveness; stereotypes of feminine traits typically include socioe-

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motional or communal characteristics, such as understanding, compassion, and affection (Bem, 1974; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Eagly & Mladinic, 1989; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). These stereotypes correspond to the prescriptive norms traditionally emphasized during gender-role socialization (Block, 1983; Huston, 1983). Moreover, the classification of a trait as "feminine" or "masculine" reflects the prevailing standards of a particular culture during a given period in history.

Over the last 20 years, researchers have been especially interested in the coexistence of masculine- and feminine-stereotyped behaviors—referred to as *androgyny* (Bem, 1974; Block, 1973; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) or *gender-role transcendence* (Eccles, 1987; Pleck, 1975; Rebecca, Hefner, & Olenshansky, 1976). It was not only women who rated themselves as having feminine-stereotyped traits, nor was it only men who reported having masculine-sterotyped traits (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). There were men who stated they were "understanding" and "warm," and there were women who indicated they were "assertive" and "independent." In fact, within-gender variation has been found to be greater than between-gender variation (Lott, 1981). Accordingly, usage of feminine and masculine to label behaviors has been criticized because the terms perpetuate the notion that certain characteristics belong more to one gender group than the other. As Lott has remarked, the terms connote biological attributions for behaviors when observed differences may be learned.

Moreover, because the connotations of *masculine* and *feminine* are so varied, psychological meanings may be confounded with physical or sociological meanings. For example, someone who is described as masculine might be a person who is assertive, a person who is muscular, or a person who drives a truck. Similarly, someone described as feminine might be a person who is supportive, a person who is dainty, or a person who is a nurse (Maccoby, 1987). Because of the potential confusion surrounding the definitions of feminine and masculine, the same people who express liking for an understanding man or a confident woman may express dislike for "a feminine man" or "a masculine woman"— even though understanding is typically equated with femininity and confidence is typically equated with masculinity. (Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

To determine whether people would react differently to the terms masculine and feminine than they would to personality attributes that are typically associated with masculinity and femininity, I asked a sample of college undergraduates to rate how much they believed they would like various hypothetical women and men who were described with instrumental and socioemotional adjectives. The respondents were expected to rate the characters who were described as "masculine" differently than they rated those who were described with instrumental adjectives and to rate the characters who were described as "feminine" differently than they rated those who were described with socioemotional adjectives. I made the following hypotheses:

1. Ratings of liking for women or men labeled "feminine" or "masculine" will not be consistent with those for persons described by socioemotional or instrumental adjectives, respectively. I made this hypothesis based on findings that self-ratings for "feminine" and "masculine" have low correlations with their self-ratings for socioemotional and instrumental adjectives, respectively (Pedhazur & Tetenbaum, 1979; Spence, 1984).
2. The rating discrepancies will be greatest with reference to nontraditional targets, for example "a feminine man" versus "an understanding man."
3. Female respondents will indicate more liking than males will for nontraditional targets. This hypothesis was based on findings that men's gender stereotypes are generally more traditional than women's (Gilbert, Deutsch, & Strahan, 1978; Kulik & Harackiewicz, 1979; McPherson & Spetrino, 1983; Smith & Midlarsky, 1985).

Method

Sample

The participants were 205 undergraduates (116 women and 89 men; mean age = 18.3 years) enrolled in introductory psychology classes at a large public university in southern California. The participants were predominantly from European-American, middle-class backgrounds.

Procedure

During class time, the students filled out a questionnaire entitled "Study of People's Evaluation of Personality Types." The respondents were to rate different kinds of hypothetical characters, using a version of Byrne's (1971) 7-point liking scale, which ranges from *I feel that I would probably dislike this person very much* (1) to *I feel that I would probably like this person very much* (7), with a midpoint of *I feel that I would probably neither particularly like nor particularly dislike this person* (4).

The respondents then rated 45 female and 45 male targets, each of whom was described by a single adjective. Nine of these adjectives reflected instrumental traits, taken from the masculinity scales of the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974): active, assertive, confident, persistent, ambitious, self-reliant, independent, decisive, and competitive, and 9 adjectives reflected socioemotional traits from the femininity scales of the same two inventories: sympathetic, sensitive, kind, helpful, affectionate, warm, gentle, understanding, and compassionate. The adjectives masculine and feminine were included among the adjectives, as were 25 other "neutral" adjectives (e.g., jealous, happy, unpredictable, conventional, secretive) that were randomly interspersed with the other adjectives. All the

adjectives were listed twice, once with the word *woman* and once with the word *man*. The items alternatively described a hypothetical woman and a hypothetical man.

Two types of analyses were performed. First, paired *t* tests were conducted to compare the respondents' judgments of hypothetical characters described as "masculine" or "feminine" with their judgments of hypothetical characters of the same gender described with instrumental or socioemotional traits, respectively (e.g., a masculine woman vs. an assertive woman). Second, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to test for overall differences between the female and the male respondents' liking ratings for the hypothetical men and women who were described by an instrumental or a socioemotional adjective. One-way univariate ANOVAs were used afterward to identify gender effects for individual items.

Results and Discussion

The mean scores for the respondents' liking ratings for the hypothetical characters are summarized in Table 1. The results from the paired *t* tests are summarized in Table 2.

"Feminine" versus Socioemotional Adjectives

Generally the male respondents did not differ in their liking for "a feminine woman" versus a hypothetical woman who was described by a socioemotional adjective (see Table 2). There were three exceptions, however: a sympathetic woman, a sensitive woman, and a gentle woman. In each instance, "a feminine woman" received higher liking ratings. "A feminine woman" was one of the most liked characters among the male respondents (see Table 1).

The female respondents clearly differed in their liking for "a feminine woman" versus a hypothetical woman described by a socioemotional adjective. The female respondents liked virtually all the targets described by a socioemotional adjective significantly more than they liked "a feminine woman" (see Tables 1 and 2). The only exception was "an affectionate woman," for which there was no difference in liking.

The respondents' ratings of "a feminine man" and a man described using a socioemotional adjective were very different. Both the male and the female respondents indicated significantly greater liking for all the men portrayed by socioemotional adjectives than they did for "a feminine man." "A feminine man" was the least liked character for all the respondents.

Thus, the respondents did not always react the same way to "feminine" characters as they did to those characters described by socioemotional adjectives. This finding was especially evident from the women's and the men's ratings of male characters, but it was also evident from the women's ratings of female characters.

TABLE 1
Female and Male Respondents' Ratings of Hypothetical Women and Men

Adjective	Female target		Male target	
	Female respondents	Male respondents	Female respondents	Male respondents
Socioemotional adjectives				
Feminine	5.46_a	6.11_b	3.06_a	2.59_b
Sympathetic	5.68	5.68	5.95_a	5.18_b
Sensitive	5.81	5.86	6.26_a	4.84_b
Kind	6.17	6.21	6.34_a	5.61_b
Helpful	5.96	5.90	6.30_a	5.79_b
Affectionate	5.63_a	6.25_b	6.63_a	4.70_b
Warm	5.75_a	6.13_b	6.37_a	4.98_b
Gentle	5.73	5.89	6.25_a	5.22_b
Understanding	6.12	6.17	6.47_a	5.57_b
Compassionate	5.82	6.03	6.35_a	5.14_b
Instrumental adjectives				
Masculine	3.32	3.11	6.17_a	5.24_b
Active	5.86	5.59	6.22_a	5.32_b
Assertive	5.06_a	4.59_b	5.70_a	5.40_b
Confident	5.88_a	5.53_b	6.25_a	5.68_b
Persistent	3.97	4.11	4.10_a	4.30_a
Ambitious	5.82_a	5.02_b	6.18_a	5.33_b
Self-reliant	6.04_a	5.32_b	6.16_a	5.70_b
Independent	5.91_a	5.01_b	6.09_a	5.49_b
Decisive	5.57_a	5.07_b	5.65_a	5.22_b
Competitive	4.83	4.92	5.36_a	5.07_b

Note. Means for female and male respondents with different subscripts were significantly different ($p < .05$).

There was little difference between the men's ratings of the female characters described as "feminine" and those described by a socioemotional adjective.

"Masculine" Versus Instrumental Adjectives

The female respondents rated "a masculine man" significantly higher than "an assertive man," "a persistent man," "a decisive man," or "a competitive man." Otherwise, there was no difference between the female respondents' liking ratings for a hypothetical man described as "masculine" and those for a hypothetical man described by an instrumental adjective (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
***T* Scores for Comparisons of "Feminine" and "Masculine" With Other Adjectives**

Adjective	Female target		Male target	
	Female respondents	Male respondents	Female respondents	Male respondents
Comparisons with "feminine" target				
Socioemotional				
Sympathetic	2.11*	–3.38**	17.11***	14.30***
Sensitive	2.97**	–2.10**	21.21***	13.27***
Kind	6.71***	0.52	19.74***	14.77***
Helpful	4.96***	–2.20*	20.72***	16.37***
Affectionate	1.47	1.30	24.04***	11.57***
Warm	2.94**	0.11	21.19***	12.85***
Gentle	2.61*	–2.50*	19.53***	15.60***
Understanding	6.77***	0.55	22.15***	15.67***
Compassionate	3.48***	–0.67	20.75***	14.25***
Comparisons with "masculine" target				
Instrumental				
Active	18.81***	12.66***	0.36	0.36
Assertive	11.55***	7.07***	–3.59***	–0.59
Confident	16.61***	11.42***	0.63	4.14***
Persistent	3.83***	4.36***	–11.40***	–6.25***
Ambitious	16.87***	9.40***	0.00	0.55
Self-reliant	19.02***	11.41***	0.00	3.48***
Independent	17.72***	9.76***	–0.67	2.19*
Decisive	15.02***	10.02***	–3.96***	–0.25
Competitive	9.54***	9.54***	–6.20***	–1.38

Note. A positive *t* score indicates that a hypothetical person described as feminine or masculine was liked less than a hypothetical person of the same gender described by the targeted socioemotional or instrumental adjectives, respectively.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

The male respondents, rated "a masculine man" significantly higher than "a persistent man" but significantly lower than "a confident man," "a self-reliant man," or "an independent man" (see Table 2).

"A masculine woman" and "a feminine man" were the least liked hypothetical characters. Analogous to the response pattern for "a feminine man," both the female and the male respondents indicated significantly more liking for all the hypothetical women described by an instrumental adjective than they did for "a masculine woman" (see Tables 1 and 2).

Thus, the respondents did not always rate "masculine" characters and characters described with instrumental adjectives in the same way. This tendency was especially evident for both the men's and the women's ratings of female characters. There was little difference concerning the ratings of the male characters.

Female Versus Male Respondents' Ratings

Separate MANOVAs were conducted to test for differences between the female and the male respondents' liking ratings for the hypothetical men and women described by instrumental and socioemotional adjectives. Each MANOVA yielded a significant respondent gender main effect, $F(10, 191) = 6.49$, $p < .0001$; $F(10, 194) = 22.00$, $p < .0001$; $F(10, 194) = 6.89$, $p < .0001$; and $F(1, 10, 193) = 4.56$, $p < .001$, respectively. One-way ANOVAs were used to test for gender effects for the individual items. The mean scores and the results from the comparison tests are summarized in Table 1.

As expected, the female respondents indicated significantly more liking than the male respondents did for the nontraditional targets (women described by instrumental adjectives and men described by socioemotional adjectives). The female respondents' liking ratings were significantly higher than those of the male respondents for the hypothetical female targets described as "assertive," "confident," "ambitious," "self-reliant," "independent," or "decisive" (see Table 1). There were no significant differences between the men's and the women's liking ratings for a hypothetical woman described as "persistent," "competitive," "masculine," or "active." These targets received relatively low liking ratings from both the women and the men (see Table 1). The female respondents also rated all the hypothetical men described by a socioemotional adjective significantly higher than the male respondents did (see Table 1). Thus, the female respondents were apt to rate the hypothetical men higher than the male respondents were apt to do.

Gender-stereotyped targets (male characters described by an instrumental trait and female characters described by a socioemotional trait) were generally liked more by other-gender respondents than by same-gender respondents. When gender differences were evident the women liked the instrumental male characters more than the men did, and the men liked the socioemotional female characters more than the women did (see Orlofsky, 1982, for a similar finding). "A persistent man" was the only stereotyped male character for which there was no gender difference. Like "a persistent woman," this target received low liking overall (see Table 1).

In the few gender differences that involved stereotyped female characters, the men demonstrated more liking than the women did, as in the case of "an affectionate woman," "a warm woman," and "a feminine woman." "Affectionate" and "warm" were among the highest rated traits for other-gender characters. If it is assumed that the sample was largely heterosexual, these ratings may reflect a

desire for physical and emotional closeness in potential romantic partners. The male respondents' high rating for "a feminine woman" may also reflect the fact that men seem to prefer more traditional gender roles for women (Gilbert et al., 1978; McPherson & Spetrino, 1983; Smith & Midlarsky, 1985).

As hypothesized, the women liked the nontraditional targets more than the men did. Similarly, other researchers have reported that women are more likely than men are to prefer or to accept androgynous persons, (Kulik & Harackiewicz, 1979; McPherson & Spetrino, 1983; Orlofsky, 1982; Scher, 1984; Smith & Midlarsky, 1985). "An affectionate man" and "an independent woman" were among the characters who were most liked by the women but least liked by the men. Conversely, "a feminine woman" received relatively high ratings from the men and relatively low ratings from the women. The gender difference regarding "an affectionate man" may reflect men's fear of affection from other men (Lieblich & Friedman, 1985; O'Neill, 1981) and women's desires for more expressiveness on the part of men (Cunningham, Braiker, & Kelley, 1982; Rubin, 1983).

Other patterns were also evident. The female respondents generally rated both the male and the female instrumental targets more positively than the male respondents did. Because men are traditionally assumed to be more competitive and dominant than women are (Winstead, 1986), the male respondents may have been more likely to perceive instrumentality in others as a threat.

Both the female and the male respondents generally preferred socioemotional cross-gender targets to socioemotional same-gender targets. As previously noted, this finding may reflect a desire for these kinds of traits in heterosexual partners.

Across all 45 targets, when there were gender differences in liking, the women liked the hypothetical character more often than the men did. As previously noted, there were some systematic exceptions, but the general response pattern upheld the results of other studies that women tend to report liking others more than men do (Leaper, 1987; Lott, Lott, Reed, & Crow, 1970; Touhey, 1972).

"A feminine man" and "a masculine woman" were the only items that elicited actual dislike from both the women and the men, as indicated by their mean scores. The hypothetical male characters described by a socioemotional adjective and the hypothetical female characters described by an instrumental adjective were liked, however. These findings provide support for the notion that among laypersons the terms feminine and masculine are not always equated with socioemotional and instrumental traits, respectively.

General Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that the terms feminine and masculine were not synonymous in the minds of the participants with expressive- and instrumental-trait adjectives, respectively, especially when the adjectives referred to nontraditional gender-stereotyped individuals. This finding is consistent with

previous findings that self-ratings for the adjectives feminine and masculine are minimally correlated with self-ratings for socioemotional and instrumental adjectives, respectively (Pedhazur & Tetenbaum, 1979; Spence, 1984, p. 25). At best, "feminine" and "masculine" are labels for fuzzy sets that encompass a variety of attributes. "Given the umbrella-like quality of both of these terms, it is perhaps inevitable that scientific discussions have displayed both confusion and misunderstanding" (Deaux, 1987, p. 289).

If the respondents did not equate the terms masculine and feminine with instrumental and socioemotional adjectives, respectively, then what kinds of associations did they make? The respondents may have been indicating their dislike for a woman who acts like a man ("a masculine woman") or for a man who acts like a woman ("a feminine man") without thoroughly considering what might be meant by these terms. A related explanation is that "feminine" and "masculine" may be used to refer to physical characteristics or mannerisms as well as to psychological traits (see Ashmore & Del Boca, 1979; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Maccoby, 1987) in contrast to adjectives such as "affectionate," which lack this ambiguity. At any rate, because it is probable that many laypersons do not share contemporary psychologists' view that masculinity/agency and femininity/communion are orthogonal, a man described as "feminine" may be conceived of as not masculine. Psychologists themselves did not generally have a very positive view of "feminine" men and "masculine" women before the advancement of the concept of psychological androgyny (Lott, 1981).

All these interpretations of the results indicate that the connotations of "feminine" and "masculine" reflect social constructions of gender. Because gender stereotypes and roles vary with economic class (Brooks-Gunn, 1986), culture (Whiting & Edwards, 1988), and historical period (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988), the connotations of "feminine" and "masculine" will probably correspond to the prevalent gender norm of the sample.

As gender roles in U.S. society become less bifurcated, the use of "masculine" and "feminine" to describe behavior could become less practical. Some might even say that the use of these terms contributes to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. As Lott (1981, p. 178) remarked, "To label some behaviors as feminine and some as masculine is to reinforce verbal habits which undermine the possibility of degenderizing behavior." If behavioral traits were described as human attributes rather than as feminine or masculine attributes (cf. Bem, 1981), gender equality might be facilitated in a small yet important way.

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