

## Sex-role behavior of adult women between traditional and modern

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, within the social system, there is a tendency to merge and delete behavioral differences between genders, sometimes creating ambiguity and unease in the assumption of socially-expected gender roles. The multitude of statutes that the contemporary woman has leads to an accumulation of roles that overlap and for which special efforts are needed in order to balance them which can often consume its psychological resources. So, overlapping roles of women in contemporary social system generates the emergence of new behavioral patterns and hence new feminine typologies.*

**Key words:** *feminine typologies, sex-role behavior, the traditional models of femininity.*

Manifestation of masculinity and femininity is determined by sex roles and cultural differences in perceiving male and female roles. Beyond the bio-psychological factor, "social prescriptions" are the main elements supporting and guiding the differences in male and female role models to their specific behaviour ("the way a woman/man should look and behave").

Recently, there is a general tendency of levelling and cancellation the behavioural differences between the sexes, thus generating ambiguity and discomfort in taking the socially-expected sex-role.

Another tendency is that most of the young people identify themselves with the male role (Krantz, R., 1968, apud Mitrofan, I., Ciupercă, C., 2002, pg.129), while the female role is becoming increasingly obscure and devalued. The process of transformation of male and female roles is due to changes in social perspective and to either permissiveness or restrictions imposed by family, religion and group morality.

In terms of sex-role identity formation of girls, Iolanda Mitrofan demonstrates the existence of three types of "identity initiations" and highlights the role of the three significant relationships in shaping women's gender identity. Thus, father-daughter relationship is extremely important in shaping gender identity, particularly in the early stage of development of the girl. It leads to the configuration of femininity and it is very important for accepting her self-image in sex-role, for psychological comfort as a woman, for the level of basic safety and self-trust. The second initiation for girls is mother-daughter relationship, leading to identification with the same-sex parent and foreshadowing the appropriate sex roles identity. This opening is the prototype of future parental roles assumed in the scenario of life. The third initiation is carried out in the couple relationship. (Mitrofan, I., 2005, apud Anghel, E., 2009, pg.54)

In recent years, within the social system, there is a tendency to merge and delete behavioral differences between genders, sometimes creating ambiguity and unease in the assumption of socially-expected gender roles. Nowadays, teenagers are not sufficiently female or male polarized, which raises some issues regarding their social and self acceptance. As far as the gender-role model is concerned, there have occurred some changes. Thus, we witness transition metamorphoses of gender-role behavior, from traditional to egalitarian. The change of the traditional gender-role model is not attained at a slow pace, free of conflicts and difficulties. The transition towards the unisex society and the reconversion of roles, from the highly differentiated and complementary to the significantly similar and somewhat similar, has not been accomplished with the full agreement of the two genders.

If we are to compare the traditional models of masculinity and femininity, *we can* say that the traditional male gender-role consists of a constellation of features and guidelines such as: competitiveness, aggressiveness, confidence, assertiveness, while the traditional female

*gender*-role constellation consists of expressive features such as: care, sympathy, sensitivity to the needs of others, delicacy, fragility.

According to the traditional model, the male was considered a symbol of authority, the power-holder. He made all the important decisions in the couple, and again had the power to impose respect on his life partner. Women's basic responsibilities were: doing house chores, taking care of children and providing for the partner's needs and satisfaction.

In the contemporary social system, the traditional male / female roles have changed much from the past. The new marital ideal has become the gender-role egalitarianism, in all of the marital life dimensions, including the intimate one. This implies an egalitarian participation of spouses, in cooperation on financial support, domestic care and childcare. Women accede to equality in respect to sexual behavior and gratifications, as well as in family decision-making. Despite the increasing tendency of gender-role equaling, many people still feel comfortable conforming to traditional gender roles. They are considered rather a minority in the contemporary society (Norton and Moorman, 1987).

One of the major results of this change is the fact that both the man and woman have the freedom to pursue their own interests, without feeling pressure from gender-role expectations. For example, the "new man" is able to share responsibilities within family life with his spouse and still enjoy the fulfillment of domestic or child care tasks, without necessarily feeling emasculated. The inverse is also true: the "new woman" can invest in some professional concerns and have behaviors that were previously assigned to men, without experiencing a loss of femininity.

These changes, aimed at equalizing gender-roles, at changing both the marital and the premarital relationship. As a result, for example, nowadays women are allowed to make appointments with men, to take initiative in sexual behavior, to participate as an equal in decision-making and even to propose marriage to a man. The man is no longer always right at any cost, but now is free to express feelings, share fears, sorrows and frustrations.

Considering these circumstances, what is the actual meaning of a "real woman" or a "real man", what kind of image these expressions depict?

However, the situation becomes much more complicated, as both men and women receive conflicting feed-back from the society: women are encouraged to be even more than men, focusing on career, competence, competitiveness and even aggressiveness. But if she is successful in her career, in a contemporary world that is still dominated by men, she expects to be considered to have lost her "femininity".

Likewise, men are encouraged to be even more than women; that is caring, emotionally expressive and sensitive to the feelings expressed by others. But if he goes too far in this direction he expects to be considered a "feminized" (J. Coleman, 1988). Gender-role transition seems to favor roles expansion by mutually acquiring gender-role attributes.

In short, women and men exchange traditional gender-roles, but this change automatically implies certain drawbacks, leading to conflicts, both within the individual's personality (female or male) and regarding their intimate relationship. There is a "long way" to reaching equality between genders, one that is supposed to be comfortable for both of them and which is expected to continue through the expansion and achievement of compatibility and harmony within the couple. That is because, obviously, any change involves the transformation of a certain balanced state, and the time necessary to reorganize both the individual and family life is longer than the one you need to dislocate everything. The accommodation to the new reality meets serious difficulties because habits, attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices are hard to change and prone to reluctance. Until the establishment of a new state of imbalance, there is also a psychological tension that occurs, an *anomie* of the male and female roles. It seems that, functionally speaking, *the* contemporary family has not

overcome this condition yet, the negative effects induced by the new conjugal role structure still prevailing over the positive ones.

What were the causes for this change? The traditional gender-role structure was modified in the context of action (most of the times) associated with the following factors: woman's emancipation, her economic independence, involvement in social life, professional career, the change of lifestyle and family values, the changes in the socialization process (the unisex society in which roles are no longer gender differentiated), the debasement of feeling within the couple (the emphasis of individualism leads to the prejudice of the spouse's involvement in couple life; the greater the emotional detachment from the partner, the lower the tendency to accept and perform traditional gender roles).

When elaborating these factors, so as to highlight the feminine typologies and the effect in the individual plan of their integration in the gender-role model, it was noticed that the feminist ideology was the one to determine women give up their cultural model, which was then considered obsolete, without even thinking of a replacement. They were still unaware of what had to be actually changed, and did not take into account the men's response to the new requirements of the gender-role model. Practically, the women did not intuit empathetically the men's possibilities to come up to their expectations. Thus, *according to* the typology proposed by K. Horney (1998, 42-53), the obedient woman was replaced by the aggressive one (obedience, aggressiveness, and isolation are generic names given to some ways of being and approaching, from the perspective of some qualities that characterize a certain type of behavior), and the main features of the two female typologies are:

- The isolated woman prefers exclusively male activities, demonstrating reluctance towards sexual intercourses and marriage. However, if she is involved in such a relationship, she eventually perturbs it because of her trying to assert, to be superior. She has great difficulties in becoming an accomplished person, or in finding her true self through her partner, or through marriage. She stubbornly refuses to acknowledge defeat and accept compromises because she believes that these are clear signs of weakness, which generate dependency. She hardly gets to know love and happiness, and that is why she considers them to be mere illusions and utopias. She believes that her partner has to accept her the way she is and to understand her thoroughly, ignoring the fact that her spouse wants and needs the same things, as well. Therefore, the relationship in which she is involved shows signs of dissolution, even if the latent time of discontent may be shorter or longer.

- The aggressive woman accomplishes and considers her role more of a responsibility, continuously trying to change something, not only in regards with an internal conflict, but also with an external one, irrespective of the number of difficulties she encounters. She is much more open to making compromises and communicating than the isolated woman. The intensity of the conflicts and disputes can reach the maximum, but, eventually, the situation receives an amiable solution. These differences are the expressions of women's inner frustrations, represented by resentment and claims, which can be either solved or deteriorated. In both cases, the aggressive woman tries to allay the dissension, because she values her relationship more than her feminist ambitions. Therefore, even the couple that seems to be the less likely to dissolve can reach a difficult stage in its relationship, and that is if the aggressive actions become very frequent. The aggressive woman unlike the isolated one, can find love easier and achieve happiness faster, even if only sequentially, combining moments of euphoria with the monotonous ones, alternating moments of love with those of hatred and even contempt.

The two types of women are characteristic for the contemporary partnership. The obedient personality, characteristic of the traditional family, tends to remain statistically insignificant, few women now accepting subordination to man, excessive tolerance and emotional and material dependence.

The change of the traditional gender-role structure leads to the transformation of the relation between authority and power of the two genders (authority and power within the modern couple being under construction and reconstruction, being based on the negotiations between partners, attitudes and their behavior towards the roles they perform in the family). Women's professional careers cause fortuitous changes in the conjugal role structure (men can no longer use traditional behavior: come home, watch TV, have dinner served, have the table cleared, rest for the next day so as to go back to work, because women no longer have time to deal physically with such a passive attitude even if they emotionally assume a wide range of roles).

Moreover, there is noticed a decrease in the birth rate, in the time devoted for children's education; the intergenerational conflicts deepen, interpersonal relationships deteriorate, especially those between spouses. Effective communication between partners could be the solution to get through this impasse, which, unsolved would have serious consequences for the individual, couple, family and society as well.

The most important and interesting psychological aspect of this change in the traditional gender-role structure refers to the women's motivation to accomplish it, more precisely to the confusion and inner conflict arising from the battle of reasons. Woman's temptation to emancipate and change roles and labor responsibilities within the couple or family is facing, paradoxically, her very indecision. And that is why because "the woman is afraid of refusing to play the role of mother or wife exclusively, for fear of losing the safety offered by the old feminine values, of waking up without any personality at all". Thus, the modern woman always oscillates between the need for independence and the desire to cling to old values. She does not manage to fully live neither freedom, nor submission." (Niel, 1974: 148). In fact, she is not trying to abandon what she detests. She has no inclination to final solutions. Men protest against men, against its condition, but never escape from it (de Beauvoir, 1949). This oscillation, the woman's indecision to fully assume the change of the role and its implications emphasizes the differences and conflicts within the couple, diminishes the reliability on family values as a social institution and creates emotional imbalances at the level of the individual.

Practically speaking, women either still do not know what they really want or are simply unaware of their actions, these reasons diminishing the lack of unity of the female representatives regarding the change of spousal models.

The denial of traditional roles and the neurotic integration of new female typologies (the independent, competitive, aggressive, isolated, "omnipotent" woman – the "superwoman" who is above all) lead to an amplification of emotions such as anxiety and depression, confusion in taking new roles due to the excess of one of the poles of the feminine-masculine dyad.

Under these circumstances, women who encounter such difficulties are integrated in the psychotherapeutic approach. The negative emotional states are generated by: the women's reluctance to change, the "psychological baggage" (fears, myths, stereotypes, family prescriptions) handed down in regard of gender-role identity, social pressures (including the state of poverty), and the image of the couple's balance which has to stand the test of time.

The aspects concerning the issue imposed by the new female typologies present in the social contemporary space, the structural changes in gender-role identity, as well as the key points within the life scenario are important elements in preparing the psychotherapeutic intervention plan. The psychotherapeutic objectives were: the integration of the gender-role model and those elements characteristic either for the traditional typologies, or the modern ones, which correspond to the constellation of the scenario, which meet the needs of authority and power within the couple, which provides emotional balance and validation of flexible and adaptive behaviors.

The attachment to a particular typology considered a model and its arbitrary reference creates difficulties in the personal development of the contemporary woman. The search for a personal gender-role model, nourishing, creative becomes an important goal in the personal development. In other words, what is validated by the community or parental model should not be considered the only starting point in establishing one's gender-role model.

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