

On Deconstructing and Reconstructing Masculinity–Femininity

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Based on a review of past research, a model is presented that integrates the study of masculinity–femininity (M-F), masculinity (M), and femininity (F) with the broader study of personality and individual differences. The model conceptualizes gender-related traits in terms of (1) the vocational/interest circumplex and (2) the Big Five and interpersonal circumplex models of personality. The first approach yields M-F as a bipolar trait that overlaps substantially with the People–Things dimension of vocational interests, and the second yields M primarily as instrumentality (or agency) and F as expressiveness (or communion). In the present model M-F, M, and F are each cohesive trait dimensions that show substantial discriminant validity from one another. M-F correlates with a number of important criteria, including self- and other-rated M-F, sexual orientation, transsexual vs nontranssexual status, scholastic aptitude and achievement, mortality risk, and social dominance and prejudice in men. M (instrumentality) and F (expressiveness) correlate most strongly with interpersonal kinds of behavior and adjustment. The current model resolves a number of theoretical controversies and suggests directions for future research. © 2001 Academic Press

... the concepts of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine,’ whose meaning seem unambiguous to ordinary people, are among the most confused that occur in science. (Freud, 1905/1962, p. 85)

Not long after Freud wrote these prescient words, psychologists first attempted to measure masculinity–femininity (M-F) as a trait analogous to intelligence (Terman & Miles, 1936). Some 40 years of research ensued, treating M-F as one personality trait among many. In the 1970s, partly in response to psychometric critiques and partly in response to new perspectives fostered by the Women’s Movement, researchers construed masculinity (M) and femininity (F) to be two separate personality traits—instrumentality and expressiveness. More recently, social constructionists have argued that M-F, M, and F are all more “in the mind of the perceiver” than they are essential traits of the individual (Bem, 1987, 1993; Morawski, 1987) and

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that these constructs—at least as measured by psychologists over the course of the 20th century—embody cultural stereotypes more than psychological realities (Constantinople, 1973; Lewin, 1984a, 1984b; Pleck, 1981). Some have even proposed that M and F are at core undefinable and should be banned from the scientific vocabulary (Spence & Buckner, 1995).

This article presents a very different position—that research on M-F, M, and F, when combined with recent work on personality and the structure of interests, permits us to form a relatively clear conception of the various meanings of M-F, M, and F. In particular, this article argues that the circumplex model of vocational preferences and interests (Holland, 1992, 1996; Tracey & Rounds, 1993, 1996) and the five-factor and interpersonal circumplex models of personality (John, 1990; Wiggins, 1996; Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996, 1997) allow us now to conceptualize M-F, M, and F in relation to these broad, agreed-upon structural models.

More specifically, the current article argues that one meaning of M and F can be derived from the Big Five and interpersonal circumplex accounts of personality. From this perspective, M comprises Big Five factors and facets that show gender differences favoring men, whereas F comprises Big Five factors and facets that show gender differences favoring women. In essence, this perspective yields definitions of M primarily as dominance (or equivalently, instrumentality or agency) and F as nurturance (or equivalently, communion or expressiveness). The five-factor model can also embrace the traits of “negative M” and “negative F,” which have been the subject of recent research interest (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson, 1994b; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999; Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979).

Alternatively, M-F can be conceptualized in terms of the vocational/interest circumplex (Holland, 1992; Tracey & Rounds, 1996). From this perspective, M-F emerges as a bipolar dimension that is strongly linked to one of two main dimensions underlying the vocational/interest circumplex, namely the People–Things dimension (Lippa, 1998b; Prediger, 1982). Although the Big Five and vocational/interest conceptualizations of M-F, M, and F may not directly include all components of laypeople’s conceptions of M and F, they nonetheless provide major fulcrums by which research psychologists can gain leverage on the concepts of M-F, M, and F and relate them to the broader structure of individual differences. Furthermore, it seems likely that one or the other of these two conceptualizations will prove to relate to most components that laypeople hold central in their conceptions of M and F (such as sexual orientation, family roles and relationship styles, nonverbal behaviors and appearances, and interests and hobbies).

Questions that have been hotly debated in the study of M-F, M, and F are readily resolved in the five-factor and vocational/interest conceptualizations. For example, is M-F a single bipolar trait, are M and F two separate dimensions, or is M-F multifactorial? The answer according to the current formula-

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