

Psychological Androgyny — An Exploration

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L'auteur examine le problème de l'androgynie et suggère que les personnes ayant incorporé dans leur personnalités les caractéristiques mâles et femelles en sortent plus fortes et plus heureuses.

Psychological androgyny is a relatively new concept in the psychological literature. The concept of androgyny itself, however, dates back to the ancient Greeks. It derives from the Greek words 'andro', meaning male, and 'gyne', meaning female. It literally means the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. Most people in North America would consider that both impossible and grotesque.

The ancient Greeks, however, considered androgyny both possible and desirable (Singer, 1977). They worshipped a version of the male god Dionysus with breasts and a version of the female goddess Aphrodite with a beard. It was during the Middle Ages that the concept of androgyny was degraded and the androgyne was considered grotesque (Eliade, 1965). Throughout the Middle Ages, however, underground cosmologies like astrology, alchemy, Gnosticism and the Kabbalah continued to hold androgynous images in esteem. And, of course, the Eastern cosmology of the Tao has always held the androgynous vision as an ideal.

The Jungian analyst, June Singer (1977), after reviewing the images of the androgyne in ancient Greece, in the underground cosmologies, in the Tao and even in modern physics and astronomy, compares androgyny to the flow of a fountain from and into a pool.

'Masculine energy has qualities of pushing out, thrusting, disseminating, and dissipating itself. As it begins to diminish, it gradually flows over into its opposite. It is taken over by the Feminine energy into which it flows ... Masculine and Feminine kinds of energy follow one another and are essential to one another yet there is no sharp line between them.' (Singer, 1977, p. 240)

Masculine energy, like the fountain, pushes out; feminine energy, like the pool, gathers up. Androgynous energy contains both, blending them so completely that at any point it is impossible to tell whether outflow or inflow is occurring. Thus the androgynous system never stagnates nor exhausts itself — it continuously flows. As Singer says,

'And so, as Lazlo puts it in one of his lighter moments, the beat goes on. Over and over again the cycle is symbolically experienced ... The Masculine principle going through the cycle, encounters the Feminine principle into which it is merged, and in the process the quality of the flow is altered' (Singer, 1977, p. 241)

Singer also discusses the psychological implications of these cosmic ideas.

'... Once energies cease to be damned up or forced into appropriate channels, the androgynous core that all human beings possess will be able to manifest itself on the surface and produce a new ease of being-in-the-world and being-with ourselves ... Without a sense of disjunction, the person will become at once tender and firm, flexible and strong, ambiguous and precise, focused in thinking and diffused in awareness, nurturing and guiding, giving and receiving.' (Singer, 1977, pp. 243)

Most psychologists, like most modern North Americans (Foushee, Helmreich, and Spence, 1979) and like people in the Middle Ages, have assumed androgyny is both impossible and undesirable. They have assumed it is psychologically healthier to be feminine if you are female or to be masculine if you are male. I would like to discuss the growing evidence against these assumptions and in support of the hypothesis that androgyny is both possible and desirable.

Within the field of psychology, the first psychologist even to hint at

the possibility and desirability of androgyny was Carl Jung (Jung, 1933), who was familiar with the cosmologies Singer reviewed. According to Jungian theory, both the masculine and feminine principles exist in the human organism but are originally undeveloped. During the development of the male, the feminine is at first repressed, linking up in the unconscious with the archetypal anima. During the development of the female, the masculine is at first undeveloped, but remains potential in the archetypal animus. Then, during what Jung calls 'the second half of life,' the energy of the anima in the male and of the animus in the female begins to exert itself. If the opposite sex characteristics can be integrated into the personality (achieved only by a few, according to the elitist Jung) the person becomes individuated — an 'undivided whole' — the highest level of maturity or development that a human can achieve (Ulanov, 1971).

Jung's work did not inspire the kind of research which would be accepted by the scientifically-oriented majority of psychologists. His ideas were influential only within a relatively small circle. It wasn't until 1974 that a psychologist at Stanford University, Sandra Bem, was able to present the idea that psychological androgyny is both possible and desirable in a way that was more acceptable to scientifically-oriented psychologists.

Bem developed a scale called the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) containing adjectives that a large sample of students had defined as either masculine, feminine or neutral. Bem then asked people to rate themselves on each adjective on a scale of 1 to 7. The Inventory differs from previous tests of masculinity-femininity in that the individual is given three scores — a masculinity score, a femininity score and an androgyny score. The androgyny score is the difference between the masculinity and the femininity scores. People can then be divided into categories of feminine, masculine, and androgynous. Bem hypothesized that androgynous subjects would be more flexible and better able to adapt to a variety of

situations because they possessed both masculine and feminine characteristics. She conducted and reported a series of studies the results of which support this hypothesis. She found masculine subjects (of either sex) independent in judgment but not very empathetic to another person's problems. Feminine subjects were empathetic to another person's problems but not very independent in judgment. Only androgynous subjects tended to be both independent in judgment and empathetic to another person's problems (Bem, 1975; Bem and Lenney, 1976).

Masculine energy pushes out

Several subsequent studies (Waters et al., 1977; Wakefield; et al., 1976; Whetton and Swindells, 1977), which factor-analyzed Bem's test and other tests of masculinity-femininity, supported Bem's assumption of the independence of masculinity and femininity. The definition of androgyny has been slightly altered, however. Bem defined it as a balance between feminine and masculine traits. In response to criticism by Spence (1975), she has agreed (Bem, 1977) that the label androgyny should be applied only to those people who possess relatively high amounts of both masculine and feminine characteristics, not to those who possess equal but relatively low amounts of masculine and feminine characteristics. (The latter have since been labeled 'indeterminates.') This new definition conforms more closely to the definitions in the mythologies and cosmologies concerned with androgyny.

Using this new definition, several studies have been conducted which support the hypothesis that androgynous people are psychologically healthier than sex-typed people. Androgynous people have higher self-esteem (Spence, 1975; Bem, 1977), are more self-actualized (Cristall and Dean, 1976) and are more mature according to Kohlberg's and Loevinger's theories of maturity (Block, 1973). There is also earlier research indicating that highly sex-typed persons are at a disadvantage. Feminine females are anxious, low in self-esteem and low in self-acceptance. Masculine boys and feminine girls are low in IQ, in spatial ability and in creativity (Cosentino and Helibrun, 1964; Gall, 1969; Gray, 1957; Sears, 1970; Webb, 1963; Harford, Willis and Deabler, 1967; Mussen, 1962; Maccoby, 1966).

Recent scientific psychological research, then, supports the view of the ancient Greeks, the underground cosmologies of the Middle Ages, and of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Psychological androgyny is both possible and desirable, at least for the individual. What is its effect on sexuality and relationships? Two studies show no difference in sexual attitudes and behaviours between androgynous and sex-typed people (Byrne, 1976, and Wakefield et al., 1976). June Singer in fact suggests that androgyny would improve relationships. She describes sex-typed relationships that have dominated our culture so far as follows:

'It followed then, that in choosing a partner, one would be attracted to a person through whom one could experience, vicariously at least, those aspects of one's own being that one could not live out conveniently in the world. This person would generally be of the opposite sex, although not necessarily. Unfortunately, all too often the expectations that the other person would fill the void in one's own personality were frequently not met, because people rarely behave as we imagine they will or as we need them to behave. Many relationships

floundered because they were based on illusion and wishful thinking. There were no longer the old bonds to hold them together, and a romantic attachment was not durable enough to last.' (Singer, p. 265)

And according to Jungian theory, when the partners in a marriage relationship reach the stage of individuation they 'must give up their matriarchal-partriarchal symbiotic style of relating to each other and to their own sexuality or suffer the breakdown of their marriage.' (Ulanov, 1971, p. 268)

Feminine energy gathers up

Three studies support Jung's and Singer's idea (White, 1966; Keniston, 1970; Levinger and Snoek, 1972). According to these studies, longer more mature relationships are based on a recognition of the separateness and wholeness of the two individuals involved. Shorter, less mature relationships are based on similarity or complementarity; the other is used to reinforce or complete one's own traits. There is reason to believe, then, both on the basis of the evidence and on the basis of the theory, that androgyny has a positive effect on relationships.

If androgyny is such a desirable characteristic, how can it be fostered and developed? A study cited in Block (1973) indicates that socialization practices by parents still encourage sex-typing. Parents of boys emphasized achievement, competition, control of feelings and

of expressions of emotions. Parents of girls emphasized the development and maintenance of close interpersonal relationships. They were encouraged to talk about their troubles and reflect upon life, show affection physically and were given comfort and reassurance. Given this socialization it is not surprising that children are still negatively affected by sex-role stereotypes. A study illustrating this was conducted in 1974 (Montemayor, 1974) with six to eight-year-old children. It indicates how early in development children begin to inhibit their behaviours and monitor their likes and dislikes according to the sex-appropriateness of the activity. The children in the study played a game called 'Mr. Munchie,' which was unfamiliar to them and neither a girls' game nor a boys' game. Half the male children were told that the game was a boys' game. Half that it was a girls' game. Likewise, half the girls were told it was a boys' game and half that it was a girls' game. Both the performance of the child and the attractiveness of the game to the child were lower if the game was labeled as applicable to the opposite sex.

But Bem and Spence have discovered some androgynous subjects. How did they get that way? In a study cited in Block (1973) individuals were followed from childhood to adulthood. The people in the study were divided into four categories — according to whether they were considered high or low on degree of general socialization and whether they were considered high or low on the sex-appropriateness of their behaviour. Their family backgrounds were also examined. In general, problems arose for men if they were insufficiently socialized. Socialization tended to temper their masculine tendencies (make them androgynous?) and thus expand their personal options. Problems arose for women if they were sex-appropriate in their behaviour. Being sex-inappropriate (androgynous?) gave them sufficient masculine characteristics to deal with the world.

Specifically, women in the sex-appropriate categories were described as either somewhat dissatisfied, indecisive, vulnerable and lacking in spontaneity (if they were also highly socialized) or as

narcissistic and sexually pre-occupied (if they were not very socialized). On the other hand, women in the sex-inappropriate categories were described as either poised, calm, non-rebellious, non-introspective, contented, gregarious and conventional (if they were highly socialized) or as assertive, critical, rebellious, expressive, autonomous and independent (if they were not very socialized). Clearly the latter group of women, those in the sex-inappropriate groups, are psychologically healthier than the women in the sex-appropriate group.

Men in the highly socialized group were described as either

The androgynous system flows continuously

conscientious, productive, ethical, giving, self-controlled and concerned about philosophical problems (if they were also sex-inappropriate in their behaviour) or as relaxed, competent, comfortable with self and sex role (if they were

also sex-appropriate in their behaviour). If men were in the low-socialized groups, however, they were described as either hyper-masculine, impulsive, aggressive,

exploitative, self-centered and irresponsible (if they were also in the high sex-appropriate group) or as vulnerable, self-doubting, insecure, reassurance-seeking, hypersensitive, and feeling victimized (if they were also in the low sex-appropriate group). It is clear from these descriptions that adequate socialization is important for the psychological health of the male.

These findings show that only males benefit from what traditionally has been considered the best socialization practice — emphasis on both socialization in general and sex-role training in particular. These findings are also consistent with earlier findings (Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Kagan and Moss, 1962; Marcia, 1966; Douvan and Adelson, 1966; Haan, Smith and Block, 1968) that while identity formation in adolescent males is fostered by parental warmth, identity formation in adolescent females is fostered only by a conscious training in independence. In our society, the road to psychological health is different for men than women.

Another study conducted in 1976 also helps identify how androgyny can be socialized in the young (Kelly and Worrell, 1976). Undergraduates were classified masculine, feminine, androgynous or indeterminate on Bem's scale. They were then asked to recall how their parents behaved towards them when they were 16. Two aspects of parental socialization were assessed — warmth and cognitive involvement. Among males, it was found that parents of indeterminate males were perceived as neither cognitively involved with them nor warm towards them. Parents of masculine males were perceived as cognitively involved, but cool. Parents of feminine males were cognitively involved and the mother, but not the father, was warm towards the child. Androgynous males had fathers as well as mothers who were warm towards them. In summary, parental warmth led to femininity in males (if the warmth came only from the mother) or to androgyny in males (if warmth came from both the father and the mother). Among females, it was again found that the parents of indeterminate females were both cold and uninvolved with her cognitive and intellectual growth. Parents of feminine females were warm but not very involved with their daughters' cognitive and intellectual growth. Parents of masculine females were warm and the father, but not the mother, was perceived as

cognitively involved. Androgynous females saw their mothers as well as their fathers actively involved in their cognitive and intellectual growth, in addition to displaying warmth towards them. In other words, in order for the male to be androgynous, parents must not only encourage his competency, but the father as well as the mother must display warmth and affection towards him. For a female to be androgynous, the parents must not only display affection, but the mother as well as the father must be involved in her cognitive and intellectual growth.

This research helps identify how children can be socialized towards androgyny and the self-esteem, self-actualization and maturity that goes with it. But socialization is training directed towards helping the person fit into society. What happens if the society is not androgynous? Studies conducted by Broverman in 1971 and a more recent study conducted by Spence in 1975 demonstrate that the traits considered typical of men appeared more often in lists of desired traits than those considered typical of women. In the Spence study, the correlation between masculinity and self-esteem is higher than the correlation between femininity and self-esteem. This evidence supports the hypothesis that masculine traits are more valued in Western society than feminine traits. This is particularly true in North America. In Block's 1973 study of masculine and feminine ideals in six Western countries, both males and females in North America endorsed masculine traits more often than people in the other five countries. Fewer sex differences and less emphasis on masculine traits were found in the two countries that have long and well established commitments to social welfare — Sweden and Denmark. Our society is not androgynous; it is masculine.

Therefore, although androgynous people may be higher in self-esteem, more self-actualizing and more mature, they may face other problems. I found no data related to this issue in men but two studies indicate that women who are androgynous may have difficulties if they attempt to fit into certain

sectors of society. One study (Lewis, 1978), based on a large sample of 35 to 55-year-old women found that feminists were more likely to be androgynous and that androgynous women scored highest on measures of self-esteem and self-satisfaction. One would think feminists would then be higher in self-esteem. That was true for feminists in urban environments, feminists who are homemakers and feminists who are college drop-outs. Feminists in university, however, were lower in self-esteem and self-satisfaction than traditional women in universities. I would argue that this is because university is a bastion of masculinity. The masculine traits of independence, logical thinking, and nonemotion-alism are highly valued there, possibly more so than in other sectors of society. Androgynous women are not masculine enough to feel valued or comfortable there. Another study (Jordan-Viola and Fasber, 1976) supports this interpretation. When university women, working women, housewives and feminists were compared, university women were found to be most anxious on the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale, with working women second in anxiety level. This was particularly true if the women were androgynous. It was not true for the university women if they were masculine. In other words, university women are fine if they are either feminine or masculine, but are anxious if they are androgynous. This makes intuitive sense. The (usually) male professor is probably comfortable if his female student is feminine or if his female student is masculine, but does not know how to respond if she is androgynous. A similar pattern holds true for the working woman except that becoming masculine does not reduce her anxiety as it does that of university women, probably because masculinity in a woman is less acceptable in the working world than it is in the university. One could imagine that androgynous women in these situations might give up androgyny even though it is desirable in order to avoid the anxiety of being androgynous. Being androgynous in our society is not easy.

Is society changing? Is it becoming easier to be androgynous? Maybe. Two recent studies

(Spence, 1975 and Michaelson and Aaland, 1976) found that descriptions of ideal men and women were androgynous rather than sex-typed. People are at least paying lip-service to the desirability of androgyny.

However, in another study (Murray, 1976) women who said they wanted to be more masculine and who rated masculine behaviours as psychologically healthier than feminine behaviours none the less devalued actual women who were seen performing masculine behaviours. Kenworthy (1979) argues that androgynous men, but not androgynous women are acceptable in society.

Maybe the increasing exposure of women to the male world will make us more androgynous. One study, however, found that in the Draw-a-House-Tree-Person test, senior women in college, who had been exposed to the male world of university longer, were less likely to draw a woman first, indicating they were less likely to identify with a woman, than were first-year students. According to a recent study (Welch, 1979) working women are more masculine and somewhat less feminine than non-working women. Exposure to the male world, in other words, may masculinize rather than androgynize women. Recall that according to the 1976 Kelly and Worrell study the androgynous female has usually been exposed to a *woman* — her mother — who is involved in her cognitive and intellectual growth. Most of the people in the working world or the university who are likely to be involved in a woman's cognitive and intellectual growth are men. According to the results of this study, this exposure to men involved in her cognitive and intellectual growth would make a female masculine, not androgynous. Consistent with this idea are the results of a study (Sistrunk and McDavid, 1971), which found that women were more willing to conform to (learn from?) an authority figure offering advice in an area considered to be one of male competence if that authority was female rather than male. All this data casts doubt on the hypothesis that participation in the male world leads to androgyny in females.

A study (Aries, 1974) of the interaction patterns and themes of male, female and mixed groups also sheds light on this question. In this study all-male groups were mainly concerned with the establishment of dominance, with interactions directed towards the groups as a whole (interactions designed for the achievement of power), the quick establishment of talkers and non-talkers, with self-aggrandizement and sarcastic teasing. Themes of superiority and aggression dominated the discussion. Males jumped from anecdote to anecdote, establishing camaraderie through sharing of stories and laughing. Females in all-female groups, however, were less concerned with dominance, showed much greater flexibility in rank order of speaking, were uncomfortable if they found themselves always in the leadership role, spoke to individuals in the group rather than to the group as a whole, stayed on the same topic for a longer period of time and talked more of self, feelings, relationships, home and the family, gaining a closeness through intimate self-revelation. So far these results are not too surprising. The most interesting finding of the study concerned what happened when these people were brought together in mixed groups. The males benefitted in that their style of interacting expanded, while the females were more restricted in the mixed group than they had been in the all-female group. Males tended to address fewer remarks to the group as a whole and more remarks to individuals. They also tended to discuss more interpersonal content when women were present and discussed aggression and competition less. The only effect of the mixed group on the women was that they spoke less, initiating only 34 per cent of the total interaction. It appears that men can achieve some degree of androgyny in mixed groups; women, however, cannot.

In fact, androgyny may even be a concept that is male-biased. 'Andro' comes before 'gyne' in the word 'androgyny' and most of the discussions about androgyny in literature are of men completing themselves by developing their femininity. One study (MacKinnon, 1962), showing a relationship between femininity and creativity

used only male subjects. I suspect that men have always been able to develop their femininity and become androgynous. According to the results of one study (Wish, 1978), men become more androgynous with age, women do not. Men have always had access to both the public world, in which masculinity is valued, and the private world of the family, in which femininity is valued. Women, on the other hand, have had access only to the private world of the family. The ambivalent socialization of women (Bardwick and Douvan, 1971) in which neither her femininity, because it is considered inferior, nor her masculinity, because it is considered inappropriate, are clearly valued, is not conducive to the development of androgyny — it most likely creates an indeterminate character.

Partly on the basis of the above evidence, but mainly from my own experience, I think women can only achieve androgyny today by placing one foot firmly in the male world and keeping the other foot firmly in an all-female support system. Ultimately, we can only become comfortably androgynous in an androgynous — not a masculine — society. That society will probably come only if the all-female support system achieves social and political, as well as personal power.

I would like to end by returning to a discussion of the definition of androgyny. Kaplan (1979) makes an important distinction between dualistic androgyny in which a person possesses a high degree of both masculine and feminine characteristics side by side, and hybrid androgyny in which a person's femininity tempers his/her masculinity and vice versa. She claims many of her clients are androgynous in the dualistic sense but are neither happy nor healthy because they use their masculinity and femininity separately and often inappropriately. The concept of a hybrid androgyny is closer to Singer's definition of 'a shifting back and forth from the constellated opposites. The person will become at once tender and firm, flexible and strong, ambiguous and precise ... giving and receiving.' But how can this be? What does it mean? The vision remains blurred.

This was the conclusion of the Androgyny Conference I attended at Moscow, Idaho, in March, 1978. Ann Wilson Shaef, a psychologist who gave the keynote address, (Shaef, 1978) listed qualities of what she called the male and female systems. A few examples illustrate how difficult it is to formulate an androgynous alternative. The male system's definition of responsibility is accountability and blame. The female system's definition is the ability to respond — who, does what, when, depends upon the something that needs to be done. What would be androgynous? Would a person be accountable and subject to blame only if he or she were truly able to respond? According to the male system, in any relationship someone is up and someone is down. In the female system it is natural for people to be on par. What would be androgynous? A floating hierarchy? In the male system, self and work are the centre of the universe; in the female system relationships are the centre. Is androgyny when self and work become relationships or when relationships become work and/or self-

centred? The male thought process is linear, it progresses from point to logically connected point. The female is multi-variate, it skips from one line of thought to another, linking them together. The first is efficient, the second is creative. Is androgyny the ability to switch from one mode to the other or is it some entirely new way of thinking? In the male system there is a truth. Perfection is possible. We can become god. (If we don't die of heart attacks in the meantime.) In the female system there are only levels of truth. What is an androgynous system? A multiplicity of gods? Or, consider a more concrete example. The male communication style is to be assertive — interrupt, talk in paragraphs, ignore non-verbal cues, don't look at anyone in particular when you talk. The female style is to be deferential — don't interrupt, laugh and let your voice trail off to discount what you have said, smile a lot, look at others for approval. I have no idea what an androgynous communication style would be.

The literature has not moved

very far toward a definition of androgyny, especially of hybrid androgyny. The stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are deeply imbedded in Western culture. We do not even have the tradition of the Tao to guide us. Our very language inhibits talking about androgyny. Although these factors insure that conceptualizing androgyny will be difficult, they also insure it will be revolutionary. It can provide us with what Singer called a 'new way of being-in-the-world' and of 'being-with ourselves'. Few thoughtful people today, feminist or not, would deny the need for that. As the Jungian psychologist James Hillman says,

'It is so difficult to imagine, to conceive, to experience consciousness apart from its old identifications, its structural bedrock of misogyny, that we can hardly even intuit what this bisexual God might hold in store for the regeneration of psychic life.' (Hillman, 1972, pp. 218-298.) ◉

There is an extensive bibliography and statistical tables for this article. For more information please contact the author: Cindy Nagel, Vancouver Community College, Langara Campus, Vancouver, B.C. V5Y 2Z6.

The Centre for Feminist Culture

The Centre for Feminist Culture of Montréal takes great pleasure in announcing our first anniversary this Spring. We are a self-supporting organization whose purpose it is to bring the women of our city course offerings and cultural events with a feminist perspective. We have an active membership of women of all ages and backgrounds; this membership participates in the planning and decision-making process of the Centre. Presently we are enjoying the hospitality of the YWCA which has provided us with office and classroom space.

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