Male and Female Roles as Therapists: Is There a Difference?

Deborah A. Christensen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol15/iss2/4
The title of this presentation, "Male and Female Roles as Therapists" suggests the existence of a dichotomy and creates a sense of polarization. This disturbs me because I don't want to be misunderstood as valuing one gender or the qualities of that gender in a way that would lessen the valuing of the qualities of the other. Oftentimes when I have given presentations on women's issues and women's strengths I have been asked, "Well, what about men; don't you like them." I'm not sure why it is that when someone speaks out favorably for men, it is generally interpreted as speaking out against men. Let me assure you that I seek to diminish this polarization, not to intensify it. I know many good men. I have learned much from them, much about myself and much about my value as a woman. I have learned to enlarge on my natural feminine qualities through interaction with both women and men. I have learned to value the differences and the commonalities between genders and to find additional strength because of both the differences and the commonalities. I have learned that as we mature, the differences diminish both in actuality and in importance.

However, I don't know how to talk about differences without creating a sense of polarity and I don't know how to talk about gender qualities without making some stereotypical, generalized statements. Generalizations, although necessary for a more complete understanding of our personal processes, are replete with
problems. I do not wish to create a false polarization of the sexes in ways that violates either the precision of science or the diversity of human experience. Any study of group differences requires generalization for which there are many exceptions. Unfortunately, these generalizations tend to stereotype and simplify people, to magnify group differences and minimize the commonality of the human experience. However, I also do not want to state that issues of gender are unimportant or deny that gender is a crucial variable in understanding the human experience. I believe that the issue of gender is an exquisitely vital component of understanding a person’s human experience—a variable that can be over-stressed, but is more often overlooked.

Generalizing: What Do We Know About Gender Differences?

Possibly the greatest difference that we find now defined between men and women is that women experience a sense of interconnectedness that is qualitatively different from the male’s experience. Chodorow (1974, 1978), Gilligan (1979, 1982), and Miller (1973, 1976), all of whom have been engaged in developing a theory of women’s psychology, view interpersonal relationships rather than autonomy as anchors of female experience. A man’s life may be defined by his achievements and his developmental “goal” may be to achieve a sense of autonomy, but a woman defines her life by her relationships and her development is measured by relationships.

Women are more likely than men to believe that, ideally, all activity should lead to an increased emotional connection with others. (Miller, 1986) Women seem to feel connections more intensely and place more importance on connections with others.

Another difference that has been delineated is found in the style of thinking. Male thought tends to be linear and logical. Gregorc refers to this as “systematic thinking” (Gregorc, 1982, 1985). Female thought tends to be multivariant and multidimensional. A woman’s thinking has been described as scattered (Schaeff, 1985), and random (Gregorc, 1982, 1985). I prefer the term multidimensional. Neither linear or multidimensional thinking is “right.”
Both have merit. Our culture tends to place greater value on logical, linear thought.

Schaef (1985) claims that women believe in the abundance model of power—that there is enough power for everyone, that we don’t need to compete against each other. When in leadership capacities, men tend to act in a scarcity model—a model that promotes competition. According to Miller (1986): “Another important aspect of women’s psychology is their greater recognition of the essential cooperative nature of human existence” (p. 41). Because of these qualities, women’s leadership focuses on facilitating others expressions of self (Loden, 1985). Male leadership roles focus on getting the task accomplished. Woman are, therefore, more relationship focused and more focused on people, even in roles of leadership. Loden (1985) explains that when women are in leadership positions their operating style is cooperative. A man’s operating style tends to be more competitive. Women value an organizational structure that utilizes a team approach. Men tend to organize in terms of hierarchy. A woman’s business objective tends to be quality output. A man’s business objective tends to be winning. Women tend to value the rational and intuitive in problem solving. Men tend to undervalue intuitive thinking.

Characteristics of feminine leadership styles include lower control, more empathy, more collaboration, and higher standards. Male leadership styles are characterized as high control, strategic, influential, and analytical. I realize that many of us have experienced female leaders as oftentimes being more controlling and hierachal than male leaders. I propose that this is not due to a deficit in women or that Loden is incorrect when she defines differences in male and female leadership styles. This is due to the fact that we live in a society that has long valued maleness and male qualities over femaleness and feminine qualities. Women have been taught and encouraged to develop a male leadership style in order to compete in a male-dominated society. A female leadership style has not been valued and many women have felt a pressure to give up their innate feminine qualities in order to be successful in a male-defined world. According to McClellan (1975):
The traditional male's single minded, specialized assertive life style is far too dominant and too much valued in so-called advanced societies. Both women and men are drawn to it—to full-time specialized careers, for instance—because that is the only way to be fully respected in our contemporary western society. (p. 93)

Additional differences include the fact that women are more impacted by society than men (Moberg, 1962). Women are less able than men to ignore what is going on around them (McClellan, 1975). Women are more contextual than men (Gilligan, 1982). When making decisions, women spend more time taking into account and giving consideration to the context of the problem. Men are more able to extract the problem from the context and make a decision based on abstract principles. Because culture impacts women more than men, it is vital to understand the impact of culture on women. A woman's life cannot be seen as separate from her context, but must be considered as imbedded in her context.

Men tend to impose hierarchies to increase their understanding and control over their world. Women prefer a sense of equality (Gray, 1982).

I have just delineated a large number of differences between the genders. Now, let me remind you that these are generalizations and there are problems with generalizations. None of us fit into these simplistic, stereotyped categories. Additionally, from research on human development we know that we all tend to become more androgenous as we mature. In other words, men as they mature begin to develop those qualities that are defined as "feminine." Women, with maturity, add qualities that have been traditionally defined as "masculine" to their repertoire of behavior (Gilligan, 1986). For mature individuals, gender differences are not as great as for those who have experienced less of their developmental process.
The Necessity for a Greater Understanding of Sociological Impact

Because women tend to be more impacted by society than men, it is necessary when involved in therapy with women to be aware of the impact of society. The now classic report of the influence of sex-role stereotypes on concepts of adulthood (Broverman, et al., 1970), attests to the close association between standards of adulthood and a cluster of characteristics valued in males including competence, rationality, and assertion. What this study indicated was that the qualities by which we defined adulthood were the same qualities by which we defined maleness. Qualities that are defined as feminine were qualities that were considered to be undesirable in adults, including such qualities as subjective, passive, and illogical.

Broverman, et al. (1973) suggest the distinction between standards for women and those for adults presents a problem for women:

Women are clearly put in a double bind by the fact that different standards exist for women than for adults. If women adopt the behaviors specified as desirable for adults, they risk censure for their failure to be appropriately feminine; but if they adopt the behaviors that are designated as feminine, they are necessarily deficient with respect to the general standards for adult behavior. (p. 45)

As others have suggested (Gilligan, 1986; Swidler, 1980), the problem does not exist with the defined characteristics of men and women, but with the overvaluing that our society places on male qualities and the undervaluing of that which is innately feminine. Swidler (1980) indicates that this one-sided conception constitutes a threat to society, one that stems from the central importance Americans give to individuality and the low value they place on social connectedness, a tendency that makes for a society that is out of balance. She suggests that this imbalance has implications for individuals and their capacities for love and work:

In some ways, the most crucial shift in our culture is a change in the symbolic and moral grounding of the self in modern society. If the self can no longer find definition in a single set of adult commitments, a set
of roles which consolidate identity, what can the self be? If it must be defined, as implicit in the modern culture of love, by its ability to resist attachment, by its ability to go through changes without being fundamentally changed, then have an ideal of a self cut off from meaningful connection to others, from any danger of commitment, attachment, sacrifice, or self-restraint. This is a model of human relationships in which people are not willing to take the risks of disappointment and defeat that inevitably accompany meaningful love or work. (p. 144.)

How Can an Understanding of Gender Differences and an Increased Sociological Awareness Help Us Become More Effective as Therapists?

Being male does not condemn one to tunnel vision or chauvinistic attitudes. Being female does not guarantee freedom from unconscious bias and prejudice against women or men. In fact, being feminist may lead to unconscious bias against men, something that female therapists must watch for (as male therapists must watch for) chauvinistic attitudes.

Because psychology and psychological experience have long been defined by men from a male’s perspective, we live in a society where the understanding of a woman’s experience has been contaminated with male myths about women. It is important for all of us to become more aware of the male myths involving the female experience. It is not only important for men but women also should understand these myths. In studying psychology from a male paradigm, many women have abandoned their own experiences as females in favor of accepting the male-defined experience as the “ideal.” These women need to gain a clear perspective of the “myths” they have accepted about the female experience.

Some of the myths that I have been able to define include the myth that autonomy is the cornerstone of development; that adulthood is a continual process of separating. Dependence is to be avoided. Independence and self-sufficiency should be sought. We should develop ego boundaries that are solid, not easily permeable. We should not be changed by our relationships with others.
Additional myths include the belief that logic is better or more reliable than intuition. Feelings are less important than thoughts.

We have long defined sexuality from a male perspective. We have been taught that there is something wrong with a woman who doesn’t experience orgasm through vaginal intercourse. She is described as frigid. How many of us have considered that female sexual pleasure may simply not be designed to be experienced in the same way as male sexual pleasure?

We have been taught that reality is structured according to a hierarchy; that hierarchal thinking is reality. We have too long believed that diversity can be ranked. Gray (1982) explains that this form of thinking is nothing less than a conceptual trap. If we were to remove ourselves from the conceptual trap we would be able to comprehend that diversity does not exist to be ranked, but to be honored. We would be able to comprehend the universe as a dynamic system, a system that is kept in motion and wholeness because of diversity.

Women need their perceptions of their experiences validated. Because we have had little understanding of the female experience, reality checking in the past has meant testing out reality according to a male paradigm. The therapeutic process must validate the woman’s experience of her own reality and help her to know and understand it. Oftentimes, I have seen women in therapy that had previously been involved with male therapists. As they define “what’s wrong with them,” I find that what they are telling me is wrong with them is very similar to my experience as a woman. They have been judged against a male paradigm and assumed the correctness of the paradigm rather than the validity of their personal experience. When they find their unique female experiences validated in therapy, the process of development and healing which is natural and innate is facilitated. Women need to know that what they experience as women is oftentimes a “normal” experience when accepted within the framework of their femaleness. We need to increase our understanding of the female experience. Female therapists can do that by learning to be conscious of their own experiences and to validate those. Male therapists can increase their understanding by improving their listening skill and making
fewer judgments about a woman’s experience. None of us should assume too quickly that we understand another’s experience.

The traditional psychotherapy model is that of a man in authority and of a woman in need: a dyad that replicates and reinforces the inequitable power distribution many women have had in their relationships with men as fathers, husbands, and employers. Because we now know the value of equal relationships for promoting female development (Miller, 1986; Christensen, 1988) we can seek to develop therapeutic relationships with our clients that approach relationships of equality. Ballou and Gabalac (1985) address this as they explain the necessity for the therapist to view the client as equal in value and worth to the therapist. To accomplish this goal, they state that the therapist must operate on the assumptions that: (1) all client verbalizations are valid, not defensive or unconscious symbolizations; (2) all information about the client (case notes, earlier diagnosis, reports, etc.) can be shared with the client; and, (3) the values and beliefs of the therapist should be explicitly communicated. They also advocate that the therapist utilize appropriate self-disclosure to contribute to a sense of equality in the therapeutic relationship. Greenspan (1983) explains:

Emotional self-disclosure is one of the cardinal taboos of traditional therapy. The therapist who reveals himself is by definition unprofessional—for professionalism hinges on the posture of distance. It is just this distance, the emotional withholding of the therapist, that is considered essential to his neutrality. Yet it is a male bias to think that this is so. In fact, there is nothing more inherently neutral or scientific or professional about emotional distance than there is about emotional connection or nurturance. (p. 28)

Because we know so little, we must, as therapists, be willing to be changed by the process of therapy. Usually we as therapists enter into the therapeutic relationship with more protection than our client. We are the “helper” and therefore our perception of reality is assumed to be correct. We judge the client’s wholeness by our experience. To become impactful as therapists, we must be willing to let the therapeutic experience change us also.
As we model the valuing of the feminine, women can learn self-value and men can increase their valuing of women and feminine qualities. I have long been distressed as I have sat in professional staff meetings and listened to both male and female therapists refer to their clients as “girls.” This represents a lack of valuing of things female. When I have questioned my colleagues about the use of the term “girl,” they may substitute the term gal or lady, but continue to avoid the word “woman.” They claim that the linguistic use is merely a cultural habit, that it is of no psychological relevance. However, one’s choice of language reflects one’s unconscious assumptions. As mental health professionals, it is imperative that we recognize our unconscious assumptions and challenge them.

Lerner (1988) points out that on some level people are cognizant that only the term woman has sexual and aggressive implications. One can see, for example, by completing the following sentences that these terms are hardly interchangeable.

1. She feared that after menopause she would no longer feel like a real _______.
2. Mary is modest and soft-spoken. She’s a true ___.
3. When Ann’s first period came, she knew she was on the road to becoming a ______.
4. She felt very passionate when she was with him; he made her feel very much like a ______.
5. She felt frivolous and young, just like a ___ once again.

Linguists have noted that the term “lady” removes the sexual implications inherent in the word woman (Lakoff, 1974). Similarly, lady suggests an absence of aggressive impulses in the female sex.

While the term “lady” desexualizes a woman, the term girl serves to impart a lack of seriousness to ambitious, intellectual, and competitive strivings that women may pursue. The fact that mental health professionals experience adult women as “girls” or
"ladies" says something about our unconscious assumptions about women.

Women can model an acceptance for the importance of relationships, connectedness, and interdependence, but they must also model a sense of self that is autonomous. A female therapist needs to value her autonomy as she values her connectedness. Although connections and relationships form the basis for female developmental process, autonomy is also a valued process. The process of autonomy has been long stressed as the only legitimate process. Although we are now learning to value connections, we should continue to value autonomy. What we should be seeking is a balancing of feminine with masculine, not an overthrow.

According to Greenspan (1983):

Therapy from a female perspective is not therapy from the "narrow" perspective of women. On the contrary, it is therapy from a wider perspective than before: one that includes what has been missing from the traditional male orientation. Compassion, empathy, intuition, nurturance; these are all culturally feminine skills which are actually essential to the practice of good therapy for women and men. Traditional therapy tends to ignore or devalue these skills while stressing the culturally "masculine" skills of intellectual mastery, discipline, control, and distance. (p. 37)

For each of us to become more effective as therapists, we need to recognize and honor both the feminine and the masculine within us. We need to recognize that society's over-valuing of the masculine presents a problem for all of us as we strive to become more mature and truly androgenderous. We need to recognize both the feminine and the masculine in our clients and honor the equality of the diversity within and between each of us.

We come back to the title of this presentation, "Male and Female Roles as Therapists: Is There a Difference?" My answer is that in excellent therapists there is probably very little difference. However, the process of becoming an excellent therapist demands an awareness of gender differences and a honest striving to honor the diversity of masculine and feminine qualities that are within each of us.
Deborah A. Christensen is Resident Psychologist at the Center for Counseling, Education, and Research, Utah Valley Regional Medical Center.

References


Loden, M. (1985). Feminine Leadership, or how to succeed in business without being one of the boys. Times Books.


