Masculine and Feminine Gender Roles

Maleness and femaleness are the properties and characteristics that identify someone as being either male or female. There are physical properties, such as having a penis or a vagina, and then there are social and behavioral characteristics such as acting a certain way and having a certain type of personality. Most people associate maleness with strength, power, and authority and associate femaleness with nurturing and delicate personalities. However, this kind of gender binary ignores individuals who consider themselves to be androgynous or who possess different characteristics not associated with their rigid gender standard. A male father may need to be nurturing and a female CEO would be powerful and authoritative. Possessing those characteristics doesn’t alter their maleness or femaleness. All behavioral characteristics can be either male or female depending on the gender identity of the person who has them.

Although gender itself is a social construct, some of the behavioral differences in men and women are explained by the different hormone levels associated with each sex. Women produce more estrogen and progesterone, and lower levels of testosterone result in a hypothalamus that is more sensitive to both of those hormones (Crooks and Bauer 117). Estrogen affects the levels of certain neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine and may account for the nurturing and more emotional roles that women tend to fall into. Testosterone, on the other hand, affects the hypothalamus and amygdala portions of the brain by increasing aggression, which accounts for “male” behaviors such as aggression (Mckinley et al 734).

Expectations and assumptions for each sex differ between societies based on that society’s needs and social hierarchy. A tribal civilization will put a higher expectation on men to be strong hunters and protectors, whereas in a developed country gender expectations are much more relaxed and open. Gender and sex expectations also vary by region based on religious demographics or racial background. The religious right in the United States often adheres to strict gender norms based on their interpretations of biblical texts (Crooks and Bauer 135, 139). African Americans, on the other hand, have much more egalitarian gender roles, going back to the age of slavery when female slaves had to serve as their own economic backbone (Crooks and Bauer 136).

Gender role expectations often pigeonhole men and women into a particular type of sexual behavior. Because one of the primary roles ascribed to women is that of a nurturer and, by extension, a mother, many women who identify strongly with this role may find themselves struggling to reconcile their desire to be nurturing to their child with their desire to be sexually available to their partners. I’m a lactation educator and notice that many new mothers have difficulties accepting the dual purpose of their own breasts. The expectations placed on them to be good, breastfeeding mothers often carries over into the sexual interactions with their partners. There is also a trend among many conservative religious groups to teach that the role of a woman is to always be sexually and emotionally available to her man. That kind of extreme gender role can often have the side effect of creating sexual interactions that do not feel equal, leaving one person feeling unconnected and used.
Conversely, sexual interactions have the ability to allow couples to reverse the gender roles that they normally fit into during normal day to day interactions. A nurturing and soft-spoken woman may love being a dominating and powerful person in the bedroom, and a man who goes through his day as an authoritarian head of household may allow himself to succumb to a more emotional and “feminine” person during sex. A safe and comfortable sexual environment can allow individuals to experiment with different roles such as being an initiator vs a recipient (Crooks and Bauer 140) or to express emotions they otherwise wouldn’t feel comfortable doing because of gender bias.

Gender roles have a profound effect on a person’s sexuality because they are a social construct and bring with them a lot of expectations about intimacy and relationships. As children are raised within certain gender roles, it sets a precedent for how they approach personal relationships later in life. Although some gender roles are positive, the gender binary of male and female is increasingly being challenged by individuals who do not strongly identify with only one gender. This androgynous identify represents a middle ground between strict “maleness” and “femaleness,” allowing a person to enjoy who they are without being shackled by gender stereotypes.
References
