

Throwing Like a Girl: How Traits for Women Business Leaders Are Shifting in 2015

In August 2014, Mo'ne Davis, a 13-year-old girl, set the sports world on fire. Davis became the first female pitcher to throw a shutout in Little League World Series history when her team, the Taney Dragons from Philadelphia, defeated Nashville 4-0. Earlier, she had thrown a shutout in the Mid-Atlantic finals. Suddenly, the phrase “throwing like a girl” took on new meaning as Davis achieved celebrity status and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Stephanie Tuck, a fitness writer and media strategist, predicted, “Over time people won’t be amazed that a girl is so good. They will simply be amazed that a particular pitcher or catcher or fielder is so good. Gender won’t matter.”¹

Is Tuck overly optimistic? What else do Americans consciously—or unconsciously—attribute to being “like a girl?” What does “like a girl” even mean in 2015? Certainly the phrase provides some insight into the difficult evolution of gendered norms in society today. We get glimpses of that evolution when women are labeled negatively for not acting as expected, such as Carly Fiorina being called “cocky” for her unilateral decision style while at Hewlett Packard. Or,

women are lauded for acting as expected—such as when Schapiro, Warren and Blair were put into positions at the Securities Exchange Commission, the Senate and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, respectively—to “clean up” after the excesses of risk taking in 2008, partly due to the expectation that as women they were risk averse.² Mo’ne

Davis’s departure from “acting like a girl” raises many questions, including, “What traits do we expect from men and women today?” and more explicitly, “What do we expect of men and women workers in business in 2015?”

To explore these questions, we first look at what traits are expected of women and men, how those traits evolved into

expectations of roles based on gender, and how those evolved into expectations of the social roles men and women are expected to play. We then share what 471 women said in 2014 about the traits they believe are expected of men and women in business today.

Previous Research

There have long been unwritten expectations for how men and women are “supposed” to act in American society. Women are expected to be nurturing and communal, and are rewarded for enacting those traits; men are expected to be assertive and agentic, and are rewarded for enacting those traits. In 1974, Sandra Bem began to document these characteristics by asking her undergraduate co-eds to look at an inventory of traits and identify which were “more desirable” for a man to enact and which were “more desirable” for a woman. Her research produced 20 neutral characteristics that were judged to be no more desirable for a man than for a woman to enact (called “androgynous”) as well as 20 “masculine” characteristics and 20 “feminine” characteristics.

Many researchers have continued to explore these traits, essentially ascertaining what “acting like a girl” means.³ Others have sought to update the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI).⁴ In 2003, Prentice and Carranza verified and refined the BSRI, examining a group of 100 traits, drawing 40 from Bem’s 60 and adding others, and once again asked college students to rank the desirability of each trait for a man or a woman in American society. They created a list of characteristics that were generally perceived positively for a human to possess regardless of gender, but were also significantly *more* positive when embodied by a woman (prescriptions for women) or embodied by a man (prescriptions for men).⁵ Their list described what men and women were *supposed* to act like: men were supposed to be, for example, aggressive, ambitious, competitive, and forceful; women, on the other hand, were supposed to be affectionate, tender, soft-spoken and sensitive. They found that not only did society believe that words such as yielding and sympathetic *describe* women (a non-evaluative framework), society also *prefers* when women displayed these characteristics.

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How had society come to those stereotypic descriptions of women and men? These prescriptive ideals of masculine and feminine personality traits persist from a time when there was a clearer gendered division of labor. Gender roles developed as the requirements to be successful in different roles were conflated with the people performing those roles. Communal traits (kind, sensitive) became associated with women because they typically occupied roles of caring (e.g., home-care, nursing, teaching). Agentic traits (e.g., independent, competitive) became associated with men as they typically occupied roles of paid work.

Additionally, this legacy distribution of men and women in specific jobs contributed to the development of social role expectations. Men are expected to work for pay in jobs that require “masculine” traits (be decisive, aggressive, competitive), while women, on the other hand, are expected to perform jobs that require “feminine” traits (be patient, warm and kind). Masculine jobs evolved (engineering, business, finance,) as feminine jobs evolved (teaching, homemaking, nursing).

Yet since the time of Bem’s seminal research, the distribution of men and women into very different jobs has dramatically shifted. Women’s presence in the labor force has increased dramatically from 30.3 million in 1970 to 70.7 million or 50.5% of the civilian labor force in 2013. In the 1970s, only 4% of middle managers were women. In 2013, women comprised 50% of middle managers and 4.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs. Additionally, 40% of women are primary breadwinners for their households.⁶

Given these societal changes, we wanted to revisit Bem’s and Prentice and Carranza’s social traits through the lens of a new context and of the current time.

Regarding context, neither of their scales describe how gender is judged in a work setting. With research suggesting that Bem’s masculine/feminine categories could be context-specific,⁷ how might gendered traits be valued in the workplace, versus society as a whole, by experienced professional women? Regarding time, given today’s redistribution of men and women across social roles, have the traits used to prescribe what is necessary to be successful in those roles shifted to become less gender biased?

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Our Research

To explore those questions, Simmons School of Management collaborated with Hewlett Packard to conduct a survey at the 2014 Simmons Leadership conference.⁸ Over 471 women professionals responded. These women have an average of 21 years’ work experience and a mean age of 41; 76% identified as Caucasian and 22% identified as women of color.⁹ The median salary is \$100,000 to \$150,000, with 34.6% identifying as individual contributors. 15.4% said they held supervisory roles, while 31.9% were in middle management and 14.8% were in top levels of management.¹⁰ While this sample is not representative of all women in the U.S. workforce, its composition does permit us to extend the research that has been conducted on undergraduate students to women working in business.

Each participant was asked to review Prentice and Carranza’s updated list of Bem’s traits. Through the survey’s random branching logic feature, half of the respondents were asked to determine the desirability of each trait in an American business context for a man, and the other half were asked to do the same task for a woman. Participants assigned each trait with a level of desirability, with 4 connoting highly desirable, -4 connoting highly undesirable and 0 being neutral.

Findings from Our Research

In the eyes of the working women in our sample, while the desirability of some of Bem’s traits remain the same as they were 50 years ago, others have shifted in a work context in 2014 (see Table 1 on the next page). In the following paragraphs, we explore the possible causes and implications of this 2014 categorization.

1. More traits equally desirable for both women and men

Twelve traits that were gender-specific in the social context became gender-neutral in the work context. While thinking about the American business context, our respondents shifted six masculine traits and six feminine traits into a category where the traits were equally desirable whether embodied by a man or a woman. This movement could be explained by two components of social role theory. One, gendered self-definitions are context specific. In our study, women may have indeed re-constructed masculine and feminine categories based on the traits they have seen expected and rewarded in a business setting. Two, social role theory predicts that gendered stereotypes and social role expectations will change to reflect the people who populate the roles. As more women have entered the workforce, the traits expected of people occupying those roles may have broadened.

There are two observations about this movement: one related to “androgyny” and another related to the relative value placed on those traits. When Bem initially published her

seminal work, she argued that individuals who self-identified with characteristics from both the masculine and feminine sides of the BSRI would be able to deploy those characteristics in appropriate situations. This flexibility generates a more highly functional personality profile than individuals who are strictly limited to either the masculine traits or the feminine traits. Bem called such individuals “androgynous.”¹¹ In today’s business context, this suggests that selectively exercising the masculine and feminine traits that are now available to both women and men, based on what the context needs, enables individuals to be more effective across diverse situations.

However, it is interesting to note the higher values placed on the masculine-to-androgynous traits than on the feminine-to-androgynous traits. Clearly the masculine traits now desirable in women (particularly decisive, disciplined, rational, and self-reliant) have long reflected the business context where task-focused rationality has prevailed. The feminine now-androgynous traits (loyal and wholesome), now desirable in men as well, are viewed as relatively less desirable. By rating the now-androgynous masculine traits significantly higher in desirability than the now-androgynous feminine traits, our female respondents have accurately assessed and reflected that “what it takes” in the business context is still predominantly masculine behavior.

This higher valuation of masculine traits extends across the entire survey, not just those masculine traits that became androgynous ($p < .05$). Across the entire survey, the mean desirability score for BSRI masculine traits was 2.2 while the mean desirability score for feminine traits was 1.25. Social role theory predicts that traits that are highly valued at work would carry a masculine connotation, since men have historically performed such tasks.

2. Business traits that remained gendered

The traits that did not become androgynous reveal challenges women face in business today, namely the persistence of the conflation of masculinity and leadership traits and the double bind that conflation represents for women. The good news for women is that the three most highly desirable masculine traits overall, decisive (3.06), rational (2.95) and disciplined (2.88), became androgynous. These traits, essential to success in work roles, are now no longer seen as the purview of men and are now accessible to women to employ as well.

However, the three most highly desired traits that remain in the BSRI masculine category are risk-taking (2.84), ambitious (2.63) and assertive (2.41). These traits remained desirable for men in both a social context (as established by Bem and Prentice and Carranza) and now in a business context.

On the other hand, the three most highly desired traits that remain in the feminine category are clean (2.64), cooperative (2.57) and attention to appearance (2.29).

The high desirability ratings of those masculine traits indicate that all individuals must enact them if they want to be successful in the work-

place. However, when men do so, they are simultaneously enacting work role expectations (demonstrating leadership) and gender role expectations (demonstrating masculinity). When women enact them, they experience work and gender role incongruence. Therefore, key traits for work role success involve violating gender role expectations. This has been known as the “double bind” that women have long experienced.

Classic responses to women exhibiting gender-incongruous behavior includes misattribution of motive, negative judgment of behavior, and generally not being seen as a leader. For example, women have long been regarded as risk-averse;

Table 1: Distribution of Gender-Differentiated Business Traits within a Work Context

Masculine still masculine (8)	Masculine now androgynous (6)	Flipped (4)	Feminine now androgynous (6)	Feminine still feminine (8)
Aggressive (0.75) Ambitious (2.63) Assertive (2.41) Competitive (2.11) Forceful (0.64) Intense (0.91) Strong personality (1.50) Risk taking (2.84)	Disciplined (2.88) Self-esteem (2.67) Rational (2.95) Self-reliant (2.79) Athletic (1.33) Decisive (3.06)	<u>Masculine to feminine:</u> Consistent (2.84) Dependable (3.07)	Loyal (2.60) Sensitive (0.54) Spiritual (0.04) Wholesome (1.18) Excitable (-0.07)	Attention to appearance (2.29) Cheerful (1.75) Clean (2.64) Cooperative (2.57) Patient (2.02) Polite (2.20) Warm & Kind (1.6) Friendly (2.20)
		<u>Feminine to masculine:</u> Interest in children (0.53) Expresses emotions (-0.1)	(not desirable) Flirtatious (-1.97)	

Note: The mean desirability score (in parentheses) captures the level of desirability assigned to that trait for both men and women leaders. The range is -4 (highly undesirable) to 4 (highly desirable) and 0 being neutral.

however, research has identified not an absence, but rather an invisibility, of their risk taking.¹² Indeed, research has found that women can mitigate negative responses when taking up masculine/agentive traits by retaining feminine/communal traits.¹³

What might those traits include? They may be the same traits that our women participants rated as important for women to enact. Eight BSRI feminine traits remained feminine when thinking of a business context. While two (distressingly) relate to appearance (attentiveness and cleanliness), the other traits focus on communal/relational practice. Those traits (cheerful, cooperative, patient, polite, warm and kind, friendly) certainly reflect long-standing gendered expectations for women.

As such, enacting those traits enable women to be gender-congruous, which may possibly offset women's use of masculine traits and permit them to walk that fine line between role and gender expectations. However, enacting only those feminine traits may significantly challenge women's ability to be seen as leaders. For example, when women enact feminine traits such as "warm and kind," their

intention may be misinterpreted as wanting to be "nice" or that they are just doing what their (nurturing) DNA supposedly dictates. They may not be seen as enacting that trait as an intentional leadership strategy to build relationships that result in better organizational outcomes.

There is a second possible positive outcome. Given the evolving paradigm of leaders who are people/relationship focused, these feminine traits may elevate in desirability for both men and women.¹⁴ Increasingly, contemporary models of leadership include mobilizing/inspiring and enabling others and being "servants" first. In that way, the relational traits preserved as feminine here may advance women's ability to be successful leaders.¹⁵

3. Trait reversals

Two masculine social traits reversed to become the most highly valued of all traits for women in business: dependable (3.07) and consistent (2.84). No one would argue against these as important traits in any organization. So the question is, why have they become "intensified prescriptions" just for women instead of becoming androgynous traits important for both men and women to enact? Perhaps the ratings reflect possible criticism that the women taking our survey have heard. Accusations of inconsistency may arise as women

toggle between using masculine traits to meet role demands and feminine traits to meet gender expectations. While this toggling enables them to mediate the effects of just acting on masculine traits—or enables them to flexibly respond to context demands—the value of a woman's flexibility may be invisible to the perceiver.

Criticisms about dependability may arise as women attempt to meet work and life demands. For example, women using flexible work arrangements have long translated into questions about their commitment to work. Employment and promotion decisions have long been influenced by the possibility of the woman candidate having children or leaving the firm after maternity leave ends. Even today, while women move into the primary breadwinning role, they maintain the bulk of child and home care responsibilities. Those responsibilities impact their ability to devote 24/7 to their job, which may result in being labeled undependable.¹⁶

The two feminine social traits that reversed to masculine traits when considering the business context represent areas where women themselves perceive deep ambivalence at work. Interest in children, when directed toward women, has been a significant source of role conflict; women have long had to choose to either be a "good employee" or a "good parent."¹⁷ Now, interest in children is perceived to be (very marginally) positive (0.53) in business, yet more so in men. Perhaps this reflects a bias of our sample: our working women want men who are interested in children (i.e., help with childcare)! Or, this very slight shift to being a masculine trait captures the generally very slight increase of men in more engaged parental roles (as single parents, primary caregivers). Finally, because women are expected to be interested in (and care for) children, their interest is taken as a given (and so devalued, assumed or made invisible). Because men are not expected to be interested, they earn an over-appreciation for doing what women have always done and continue to do the majority of the time.

The social trait of expressing emotions also flipped to masculine in a business context. With a very close to neutral rating (-0.1), it is not a highly desirable trait. The movement towards masculinity may reflect that our women survey takers believe that expressing emotions is more likely to be viewed positively when embodied by a man: he's convicted, committed, inspiring, while she's having a bad day. Showing emotions in a positive way (speaking passionately about a vision, showing commitment to a position) is a component of many 21st century leadership models, but still may present a challenge to women.

Conclusion

Our findings, and the movement or non-movement of social traits in the business context, both reflect today's workplace and offer insights into the expectations of its employees.

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To some extent, the workplace has slightly shifted to become more androgynous, with more gender-neutral traits expected of all its inhabitants. Bem predicted this trend in 1974. In 1987, Eagly, in developing social role theory, proposed that as the gender composition of role inhabitants changed, so would the traits believed necessary for success in those roles and to whom those traits are ascribed.¹⁸ With the increase of women into the labor force, more traits that had been masculine are now seen as desirable for both men and women.

Another explanation may be the shift in contemporary thinking about leadership. New models of leadership (servant, connective, bottom-up) challenge the conventional command-and-control model. This shift moves from a heroic model, with traits closely aligned to masculinity (assertiveness, dominance) to a collaborative, relational model, with traits typically assigned to women (empathy, relational ability). The increase in androgynous traits may reflect the need for contemporary leaders to draw from the full spectrum of traits.

The higher ratings assigned to masculine traits indicates that the workplace is still predominately masculine. The strength

of desirability for masculine-still-masculine traits (ambitious, assertive, competitive, risk taking) sets up gender role incongruence for women: those masculine traits are needed for success in the workplace, yet still may not generate success for the women who enact them. Men have a clearer roadmap to success: use those masculine traits and you will be rewarded. Women have a less clear roadmap: use those necessary but masculine

traits, and you may be successful ... or not. Outcomes (promotions, task success, and recognition as a leader) are less certain.

Role congruity theory posits that the “perceived incongruity between the female gender role and leadership roles leads to two forms of prejudice: (a) perceiving women less favorably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles and (b) evaluating behavior that fulfills the prescriptions of a leader role less favorably when it is enacted by a woman. One consequence is that attitudes are less positive toward female leaders than male potential leaders.”¹⁹ The masculine-still-masculine traits are areas where women can expect that their leadership will not be as easy to spot and appreciated as for

some of their counterparts who are men. Women should not abandon these traits, but they should know that enacting them will not be sufficient to earn top leadership positions. Because of gender role and leader role congruency, it is less cumbersome for men, when enacting these traits, to be seen as a leader.

Nevertheless, the traits needed for success in business are changing. Is this a story of the glass half full or half empty for women? On one hand, having fewer prescriptive traits means more freedom. On the other hand, it means there is less certainty. So, how to navigate the mine field?

For women, as stated earlier, it may involve concurrently employing feminine traits to moderate potential negative judgments when enacting masculine traits. It also may involve clearly naming the trait being enacted and explaining your strategic intention. For example, when taking risks—a highly desired masculine trait—a woman can be collaborative (feminine) in building the risk decision, but she should be explicit about the reason for that collaboration. The collaboration is not because of risk aversion and lack of confidence, but because it yields the best decision.

For business, navigation involves being aware of the traits you hire for and to whom you unconsciously attribute those traits. In terms of promotion, organizations should explore what traits are valued and rewarded, and again, examine whether the enactment of those traits is seen and valued differently if exercised by a man or a woman.

Further Research

While our study contributes significantly to the literature by examining Bem’s research in a business context, there are more questions to explore regarding gender, race/ethnicity, and industry.

- Given that our survey participants were all women, a critical question is, would men in similar businesses see the shift in masculine and feminine traits the same way? Earlier researchers, such as Bem and Prentice and Carranza, carefully worked with populations that were half men and half women, albeit undergraduates. Assessing trait desirability of people across the gender continuum would provide a more nuanced understanding.
- Bem does not note the race of the participants in her 1974 study. However, given that they were undergraduate students at Stanford University, we could assume that the vast number of these students were white. Prentice and Carranza carefully noted the race, ethnicity and gender of their participants. Because our sample includes 20% women of color, we will next be able to explore how those women experience trait expectations. While we recognize the important differences across ethnic groups and the diversity inside each group, the

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size of our ethnic cells are too small to permit cross-group analyses (see table in Endnotes). Future research may take that up to deepen the intersectional understanding of multiple identity factors.

- Finally, how might trait desirability play out in different industries? We know that some industries (e.g., science, technology, engineering, math) are dominated by men. Social trait theory would predict that until there is more parity regarding the gender of people in those businesses, the more conventional the social traits will remain. As Kanter argued back in 1977, numbers matter.²⁰

As women have moved into the historical domain of men—first into the paid labor force, then into middle management, and now increasingly into breadwinner and senior leadership positions—conventional thinking about gender roles, social roles and expected traits is being challenged and rewritten. One can still only imagine a society where the contributions of a Mo'ne Davis, or any individual, will not be constrained by gendered expectations.

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Endnotes

¹Wallace, K. 2014, Aug. 20. Baseball sensation Mo'ne Davis' impact on girls and boys. *CNN.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/20/living/mone-davis-baseball-sensation-impact-girls-parents/>

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⁸**We gratefully acknowledge Hewlett-Packard's support** in the administration of these electronic surveys. SPSS was used to conduct frequencies, regressions, and correlations of the data.

⁹**Use of the term "women of color":** In this study we are using the term "women of color" to include the following groups: African American, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, Bi-racial, Hispanic/Latina, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. While we recognize there are important distinctions between women of different ethnicities, and between women inside the same ethnic group, the small numbers of women in each ethnic cell (see Endnote 10 below) permit us to only break the sample into women of color and women who are white.

¹⁰**Demographics of our sample:**

Number of respondents: 471 women
Median age: 43
Median work experience: 22 years
Management distribution:
35% individual contributors
16% supervisory position
32% middle management
15% upper management

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Industry distribution: While respondents could select their industry from 21 options, we collapsed industry choices into six larger cells to ensure adequate size for analysis. Due to the makeup of our sample, this resulted in the cells of:

Technology: 43.1%

Finance: 18.9%

Medical/health care: 14.4%

Business services: 10.4%

Media, retail and other industries: 9.3%

Nonprofit: 3.8%

Median personal income: \$100,000 - \$149,000

Racial/Ethnic distribution:

African American: 6.5%

Afro-Caribbean: 0.8%

Asian: 6.1%

Bi-racial: 1.5%

Hispanic, Latino: 3.8%

Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0.2%

Caucasian/White: 75.7%

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