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## **Representations of Men and Women about their Relationship with the Other Sex: Images of Emotion and Sexuality**

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### **Summary**

The wider social developments of the last five decades, the feminist movement, sexual revolution, the entrance of women in the workplace, as well as the expansion of media and the diffusion of information to all social groups have resulted to changes in gender relationships, but also to what Meyrowitz has called the “blurring” of feminine and masculine social roles. At the core of the transformed gender relationships is a change in the way that emotions are experienced and expressed. Both men and women are now allowed not only to experience and express emotions (e.g. aggression and sexuality) which in the past were considered unacceptable, but are also socially encouraged to find ways to express and manage their emotions for the benefit of communication and personal development. The process of redefining gender-roles and renegotiating new ways to relate brings about new forms of conflict and friction in the communication between the genders.

Research, mostly quantitative, has indicated that overt changes in the behavior and communication between the genders are not yet well processed at the covert individual psychological level. Both genders struggle to behave according to the new social demands and to stand before each other as equals both in the private (e.g. family) and in the public sphere (e.g. workplace and social life), but are not yet psychologically prepared to achieve so, in practice. Part of the so called “crisis in gender relationships” (or as Giddens calls it “emotional abyss between the sexes”), that is recorded not only in research, but also in everyday popular narratives stems from difficulties in the management of emotion and sexuality in the context of a more equal relationship. Men and women are being socially prompted to behave in androgynous ways, but are not yet psychologically prepared to function accordingly or to accept androgyny in the other sex, particularly when this interferes with traditional ways of relating.

The purpose of the present research program was to investigate the deeper psychological mechanisms that underline these transformations by analyzing men’s and women’s representations about gender relationships, as they arise from the way they describe their own experience of relating with the “other” sex. Most published research provides quantitative data, but what is missing is a systematic investigation of what men and women *themselves* feel and believe about the transformation in relationships, what they consider to be the effects, how

they incorporate and manage these changes in everyday life, how they negotiate tensions and achieve attunement in heterosexual relationships.

Our interest expanded in heterosexual relationships across three different contexts: (a) romantic relationships (couples), (b) friendship and (c) workplace.

Qualitative data were collected from in depth semi-structured interviews with both men and women from three age levels (25-35, 36-45 and 46-55). Participants were selected with the combination of two sampling techniques: multiple variation and typical case. Saturation was achieved with 33 interviews, each lasting approximately three-hours.

Analysis of the qualitative data was based on a combination of grounded theory and phenomenology. Some of the main findings were the following: (a) contrary to current belief, there appear to be more gender similarities than differences in what individuals expect and fear about heterosexual relationships, (b) both genders struggle to negotiate new androgynous roles and feelings in the context of their relationships, but they often feel that the "other" sex does not appreciate the struggle, (c) heterosexual friendship is increasing and provides an important psychologically secure base for familiarizing with the demands and expectations of the "other" sex as well as for experimenting with new ways of relating, (d) heterosexual working relationships are the most difficult contexts for the management of emotion (mainly aggression) and sexuality; both genders (but mostly women) feel that they become "desexualized" within the workplace, while at the same time they struggle to maintain their sexuality as an integral part of their personality, that does not interfere but enhances between-gender communication and relationships.

**Keywords:** gender sexuality, emotion, androgyny, communication, relationships