SECOND EDITION

MASCULINE & FEMININE

GENDER ROLES OVER THE LIFE CYCLE

MARIE RICHMOND-ABBOTT

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Marie Richmond-Abbott
Eastern Michigan University

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About the Author

MARIE RICHMOND-ABBOTT is a professor of sociology and women's studies at Eastern Michigan University, where she teaches courses in gender roles and family. Her degrees are from Florida State, the University of Miami, and Duke University. Her publications include books on immigration, adaptation, and family structure among Cubans in the United States and an edited book dealing with the American woman. Recent articles have dealt with gender-role attitudes and behavior in single-parent families and gender roles as they affect life-satisfaction and happiness among the elderly. She is married and has two children.

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For Hank, Kim, and Charlie—for
the second time

Preface

When I wrote this book, I wanted to do three things that were not being done in gender-role textbooks. The first was to attempt a more equal balance in discussions of masculine- and feminine-stereotyped roles in this society. The second was to present a life cycle perspective of gender roles and show how gender-role socialization continues while gender-role prescriptions change in adult years. The third was to include material on certain groups whose gender roles deviate somewhat from the American cultural norm. I believed that these groups, such as single-parent families, remarried families, and black families, could tell us a great deal about changing roles and the possibilities and probabilities for different kinds of behavior in the future.

While writing the second edition, I realized that the intervening years had changed my focus but that my problems remained the same in many ways. Today there are many gender-role textbooks on the market, and many of them include material on men. I found it very difficult when I wrote the first edition to find quality material about men's roles. The original literature was largely anecdotal, and I had to search through the literature on sports, health, aging, and other areas to find relevant information. While there is more information today, I still do not find the hard base of research that one sees in studies about women's roles. In this edition as well, I have found the material on men localized and sparse, not covering all areas. It is still difficult to discuss the male role in some areas because it is the dominant or normative role. It is difficult to discuss variations from the dominant norm and not just restate what most people already know about cultural stereotypes.

My problems in the second area were different. There is a wealth of information about adult socialization; the problem is sorting through the mounds of data to find what is relevant. In most cases little has changed: Details have been added to the life cycle picture, but the basic framework remains the same.

The objective of including information about various groups that might be in the vanguard of change was in many ways more difficult than before. While there was new information on gay couples, single parents, and the aged, there was very little new research on working-class families and black families.

I had a fourth objective in writing this second edition. In the years since the first edition, I have become more convinced about the overriding importance of institutions which perpetuate stereotypes and control gender-role behavior. While this book still emphasizes socialization over the life cycle, I wanted to show that societies initiate and perpetuate the kinds of socialization they want. Socialization is only a reflection of the larger society. What does it serve women, for example, to be socialized to be achievement-oriented and competitive if they are kept out of sports, academia, and rewarding occupations? Does

it help men to learn to express their emotions and to be nurturant if the corporate world continues to punish that kind of behavior? I want to emphasize that societal values and institutions give us the kind of gender roles we have and that the institutions of society must change if we are to socialize our children in a different manner. Obviously, institutions are established and perpetuated by those who have power. This second edition therefore deals in more detail with the issues of power and control.

Writing a book that attempts to describe the roles of men and women in our culture has other problems. As a woman, it is tempting for me to emphasize the problems of stereotypical women's roles over those of men and to push for change that will help women. I have tried to be evenhanded, but I am aware that I have not succeeded. I can only restate to the reader what I say to my gender-role classes: "To be profemale does not mean that one is antimale." Male-dominated institutions have been my source of information about stereotypes and control of behavior that inhibit the choices of both men and women.

As I wrote this edition, I was aware of another problem that had not been obvious to me a few years earlier: Androgyny may not be a solution to our gender-role problems even in the realm of socialization. For a longer discussion of the issue of androgyny, I refer the reader to Chapter 1. Here I would simply like to say that I hope we can move beyond a state where "masculine and feminine elements are present, accepted and accessible within the individual" to a point where "it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their place without regard to propriety or custom [or their sex]." I hope we can move to a point where all kinds of characteristics will be equally valued and the words "masculine" and "feminine" will have no function when one is referring to traits or behavior.

Obviously, a prerequisite for this is that there cannot be male-dominated or female-dominated institutions but that human values will predominate and all persons will have equal access to high status and positions of power regardless of biological sex. This is obviously an ideal state and not one which is easily attained. To get to this point there will have to be simultaneous changes in socialization, values, and institutions.

One of the major tasks of this book is to document the assertion that traditional gender roles are limiting to human potential and that androgyny or some form of transcendence of gender roles is a healthier and more productive state for the individual and the culture. To that end I have tried to explain the reasons why we are socialized into traditional roles and examine our institutions so that we can see the sources of our oppression.

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of gender roles and examines some of the assumptions about such roles. It also looks at how gender roles combine with biological sex, status, and power. I have attempted to show that cultural roles are deeply embedded in our cultural history and reinforced by societal institutions. Chapter 2 discusses the historical and cross-cultural roots of the different status accorded to each gender. Chapter 3 examines controversial ques-

tions about physical differences and similarities between the genders, with an emphasis on the paucity of differences and the extent of similarity. Chapters 4 and 5 trace the mechanisms by which children are socialized into traditional roles: parents' expectations and behavior, toys and play, books, media, and school. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the adolescent years with their emphasis on establishing a mature individual identity and the convenient but limiting definition of such an identity that traditional roles give the adolescent. I have tried to point out in these chapters the difficulty young people have in deviating from traditional roles; it is difficult for them to establish an identity approved by parents, peers, and the culture, much less to risk charting the unknown territory of self-knowledge and different behavior.

The last section describes various institutions that shape our behaviors with their norms and sanctions. Chapter 8 discusses the American family and how this institution encourages certain gender roles with stereotypes such as "provider" and "child raiser." This chapter also looks at how power relationships and roles have changed in recent years. Chapter 9 discusses current family variations. As we look at dual-career families, single-parent families, homosexual families, black families, working-class families, and the like, we see different definitions of gender roles. These families may be the vanguard of gender-role change in this country. Chapter 10 looks at how religion, science, and medicine shape our norms and control our behaviors. Chapters 11 and 12 describe how the economic and political institutions of our country have reinforced traditional gender roles and examine the changes taking place in institutional structures. Chapter 13 examines the possibilities for moving beyond traditional gender roles in the future.

As I wrote this manuscript, I became more aware of the interconnection between individual socialization and behavior, the constraints of societal institutions, and the pervasive power of cultural values. I am convinced that initiating change in one area without initiating changes in all three is of little use. Since writing the first edition, I have also become a little cynical. As I have delved more into stratification and power issues, I have come to realize how difficult change will be.

At the same time, I am even more convinced of the need to initiate such change, to move beyond stereotyped gender roles as we have known them. If we can free ourselves from the behavior and social roles assigned to us because of biological sex, we will have greatly increased the possibility that each person will be able to realize his or her individual potential.

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Marie Richmond-Abbott

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