

STOOGES WEEKLY SPECIALS

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Balancing 'male' and 'female' traits lessens stress, helps families cope

By Mary C. Reilly

Today's Nebraska family rejects traditional sex-roles and authoritarian family patterns. Instead, it embraces egalitarian marriage, a UNL researcher said.

JoEllen Polzien came to this conclusion as she completed her doctoral dissertation in December 1983 in Community and Human Resources at UNL.

To part of a nine-state survey project studying "stress in the middle years of the family," Polzien added a survey in Nebraska studying androgyny. Polzien set out to prove the hypothesis that couples with androgynous characteristics have families that are most successful in dealing with life stress.

A man who will cry and nurture children and a woman who is athletic and a leader in the business world have androgynous characteristics. They are more likely to lead happier, more satisfied and more fulfilling lives, according to the study.

The psychological concept of androgyny asserts that men and women with a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics are most comfortable with themselves and life, Polzien said.

Sampling 127 families in her Nebraska survey, Polzien found that the most successful are adaptable and cohesive. An adaptable family has flexibility, democracy and shared power. A family that is cohesive has strong bonding, or family closeness, Polzien said.

"Polzien used the Bem Sexual Inventory to determine androgynous characteristics. The couples in the sample had to be in their middle years with at least one child 12 to 23 years old. The average age of the couples in the sample was 46.

Those who filled out the survey were categorized as 1) androgynous, 2) feminine sex-typed, 3) masculine sex-typed and 4) undifferentiated.

Persons who fall in the undifferentiated category score low on both masculine and feminine scales. These people appear to be socially inadequate, the least satisfied with life and have poor family relationships, Polzien said.

Twenty-five percent of the couples fell into the androgynous category. The degree to which these 25 percent out-scored all the other couples on psychological and emotional stress factors is very significant, Polzien said.

"Every family is faced with stress," Polzien said. But, she said some overcome it. The study was done to discover why.

No particular characteristics, such as gender, age, education level, income or occupation, were common to all androgynous couples.

One descriptive characteristic did interest Polzien, however. She said no differences were found in the amount of life stress experienced, between rural and urban areas.

"This defies the stereotype that life is laid-back and calm in rural areas," Polzien said.

But because Nebraskans are a homogenous group, Polzien said, she will not know if the equal rural-urban stress level is significant until compared to other states.

The idea of androgynous families is "hotly contested by fundamentalists and conservatives," Pol-



Chris Medley/Daily Nebraskan

zien said.

"Leaders of the Moral Majority are making claims that the traditional family is what's needed, what will save America," Polzien said.

However, she said, they have no research to back up their claims. The research in the field directly refutes their claims, Polzien said, citing her study.

How families spend their recreation time was a very significant factor among androgynous families in the study, Polzien said.

Androgynous families had shared interests and shared recreational activities, while sex-typed parents did not.

Traditional authoritarian families reflect a rigid culture which separates sex roles. The man has his night out with the boys, and the woman goes to ladies' clubs while children are left at home, Polzien said.

"It makes sense that androgynous parents have shared activities in which the family participates together and in which both parents participate equally with the children," Polzien said.

Polzien found only three psychosomatic symptoms out of 12 that had significance in relation to androgyny. The three are:

- Androgynous people could relax more than others.
- Although statistics are weak, studies show that androgynous women sleep more soundly than other people.
- Headaches occurred with the same frequency between males and females regardless of androgynous characteristics.

However, women had more headaches regardless of sex-role stereotyping or androgynous characteristics. This is because social roles are more difficult for women, Polzien said.

Another section of the study, a family inventory of life events, measured disturbing events internal to the family, such as death, marriages, divorces, school or work.

"It is significant that androgynous parents are more disturbed by personal loss concerning relatives and close friends," Polzien said.

"This makes sense," she said. "The death or loss of a close friend should be disturbing to emotionally healthy people."

At present, Polzien is compiling the findings of her dissertation for professional psychology and family life journals.

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