CHAPTER 1

The Dilemma

Introduction

One of the inherent contradictions facing American women today is the conflict between an innate motivation to be competent and the existing pattern of sex-role socialization which relegates women's expression of competence to spheres devalued by society. Women face the "choice" of being perceived as either competent or feminine, since being competent *and* feminine is contradictory in contemporary American society (Baruch, Barnett, & Rivers, 1983; Canter & Meyerowitz, 1984; Coutts, 1987; Lott, 1985). Competence is valued by society but is inconsistent with femininity. Since femininity and the female sex role are associated with incompetence, the dubious reward for being sex-role appropriate for women is low self-esteem (Marsh, Antill, & Cunningham, 1987; Nadelson, 1989; Sanford & Donovan, 1984).

This dilemma between a woman's desire to express her competence and her femininity forms the central focus of this book. It is rooted in an historical context that predates the landmark Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz (1972) study which exposed the relationship between gender and mental health. In 1946 Mirra Komarovsky, a professor at Barnard College, published an article, "Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles," in which she examined "the nature of certain incompatible sex roles imposed by our society upon the college woman" (p. 184). Using biographical material and interviews to study prevalent sex roles, she discovered two major roles existing for campus women.

One of these roles may be termed the "feminine" role. While there are a number of permissive variants of the feminine role for women of college age (the "good sport," the "glamour girl," the "young lady," the domestic "home girl," etc.), they have a common core of attributes defining the proper attitudes to men, family, work, love, etc., and a set of personality traits often described with reference to the male sex role as "not as dominant, or aggressive as men" or "more emotional, sympathetic."

The other and more recent role is, in a sense, no *sex* role at all, because it partly obliterates the differentiation in sex. It demands of the woman much the same virtues, patterns of behavior, and attitude that it does of men of a corresponding age. We shall refer to this as the "modern" role. (pp. 184–185)

Komarovsky's article continues with an exploration of how these women cope with the conflict between the two roles, as well as with the conflicting messages they receive from family and friends as to which role they should adopt. Her concluding remarks, although more than forty years old, still speak poignantly to the situation facing American women today.

The problems set forth in this article will persist, in the opinion of the writer, until the adult sex roles of women are redefined in greater harmony with the socioeconomic and ideological character of modern society. Until then neither the formal education nor the unverbalized sex roles of the adolescent woman can be cleared of intrinsic contradictions. (p. 189)

The absence of harmony between the urge toward competence and the desire to be sex-role appropriate continues to diminish the self-esteem of many women (Notman, 1989). Half a century later the expectations for women in this society are still strongly discordant. The harmony that Komarovsky called for is still before us as we near the close of the twentieth century. The redefinition that Komarovsky calls for is an essential component of this work.

What is Competence?

Competence is defined in a number of ways in our culture. It can describe one's ability to perform a task, e.g., one has competence as

a typist, or it can describe a general group of traits and behaviors, e.g., assertiveness, leadership skills. Competence can also be associated with certain roles, such as physician or lawyer, rather than with skill or a set of behaviors. These definitions of competence are important because they are embedded in our culture and thus create the cultural images which shape our development, our experience, our sense of ourselves, our hopes, and our plans (Sternberg & Kolligian, 1990). Most importantly, in this culture these definitions of competence are unquestionably associated with masculinity (Canter & Meyerowitz, 1984; Long, 1989).

Society does not value, and, in return does not reward, those traits and behaviors that it does not perceive as exemplifying competence. Furthermore, one's sense of competence is greatly influenced by those roles, tasks, and behaviors that *society* associates with competence. By the term society I am referencing the majority cultural norms and values that influence the perceptions of all of us. A homemaker, regardless of her actual objective competence, does not conform to society's perception of a competent person (Baruch & Barnett, 1975; Scarf, 1980). When a woman describes herself by saying, ''I'm just a housewife,'' she reveals by ''just a'' that her role is considered to be small and unimportant. The greater the extent to which any woman accepts society's definition of competence as a self-definition, the lower will be her sense of competence. If she rejects society's definition of competence and evaluates herself as competent, she will have a higher sense of competence, and thus self-esteem. However, even if she is able to reward herself and value her work in the absence of external valuation, the low status associated with those roles and behaviors which are not included in society's definition of competence will diminish others' assessment of her actual competence. It is not surprising, then, to note that the high incidence of depression reported by homemakers has partially been attributed to performing a role which is not viewed by society as requiring competence (Greenglass, 1985; Hoffman & Hale-Benson, 1987; Kingery, 1985; Repetti & Crosby, 1984).

A woman's conflict between her urge to be competent and her desire to be feminine becomes all the more apparent when we examine male–female interactions. For example, women's level of performance is inhibited when working with men, particularly *less* competent men (LaNoue & Curtis, 1985; Swanson & Tjosvold, 1979). This is particularly disturbing given that a competent person is generally liked

more than an incompetent person, except when the competent person is a woman in a work situation. In those instances the competent woman is more likely to be omitted from the work group (Hagan & Kahn, 1975). If it is true that women are uncomfortable outperforming men, then we can expect to see some internal conflict in those women who desire to do well and yet do not want to be threatening to men. This conflict is present not only in the workplace but also in domestic life, as evidenced by women asking for help from their husbands to make them feel needed rather than because the woman actually needs the assistance (Hochschild, 1989). That women are socialized to not outperform men and thus inhibit themselves rather than risk emasculating a man is a direct by-product of our current association of competence with masculinity. As a result, competent women may be labeled ''deviant'' or ''exceptional'' depending on prevailing attitudes.

In summary, the relationship between competent behavior and the development of high self-esteem is particularly complex for women because it is fraught with intrinsic contradictions between competence and femininity. The dilemma for women desiring to be competent was poignantly captured by Baruch (1974):

> Competence is apparently viewed as a masculine trait, but our society values achievement and competence highly. Thus, women are caught in a double bind: If they develop their competence, they are ''masculine''; if they do not, they are not socially valued and learn to devalue themselves. (p. 286)

Psychological Theories of Competence

Beyond societal norms of competence lies the psychological theory of competence motivation, as put forth originally by Robert W. White. His theory provides quite a different definition of competence, stated as ''effective interaction with the environment'' (White, 1959). This definition of competence, although quite simple in phrasing, stands in stark contrast to societal norms of competence. This definition does not specify interacting in particular ways, fulfilling a particular role, or having a certain skill, whereas society has a clear sense of what is considered competent or not competent behavior. Furthermore this definition makes no reference to gender. Psychological theory of com-

petence motivation thus is nominally free from trait genderization (Martin, 1985), the association of a trait with only one gender, whereas societal definitions of competence are unquestionably associated with masculinity.

Competence motivation theory differs from societal norms for competence in two other essential ways. First, the theory states that competence motivation is based on a neurogenic urge toward competence. As such it is concerned with the survival of the species and produces an interest in the environment beyond simply satisfying need or following instinct. This urge toward competence is present at birth and develops as the child's interactions with the environment become increasingly complex and intentional. Everyone, regardless of gender, has an urge for competence.

> The behavior that leads to the building up of effective grasping, handling, and letting go of objects, to take one example, is not random behavior produced by a general overflow of energy. It is directed, selective, and persistent, and it is continued not because it serves primary drives, which indeed it cannot serve until it is almost perfected, but because it satisfies an intrinsic need to deal with the environment. (White, 1959, p. 318)

In other words, as human beings grow older, the "urge toward competence" is displayed through interacting with the environment in hopes of attaining specific goals. Theoretically, then, White's "urge toward competence," like competence itself, is neither inherently gender linked nor confined to specific realms of activity. The motivation is the same regardless of the expression it takes; it is the same motivational urge, be it expressed by learning to ride a bicycle, cooking a meal, or becoming an accountant.

The environment, however, can respond to these attempts at effective interaction in a variety of ways, some of which will enhance learning and others of which will deter it. How willing and receptive the environment is to interacting with the individual will influence how he/she assesses his/her own ability to demonstrate competence. Many factors that may influence how receptive the environment will be readily come to mind, e.g., appearance, intelligence, race, and gender. It is the interactive nature of this relationship that I believe is an essential, yet to date overlooked, component of competence motivation.

White's definition of competence thus ironically stresses the importance of interactions with the environment without addressing certain prevailing biases in society. As a consequence White's theory is limited in ways similar to other major theories of adult development which, while based on men's experiences, are applied to both genders (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976). Implicitly White falls into this pattern by developing a theory which addresses the fact that individuals and the environment shape one another, yet he fails to examine a pervasive and consistent bias based on gender, not actual ability. The importance of understanding that competence development is not purely an internal process, but rather a complex interaction between the individual and various environmental cues, is clearly a strength of White's work. Ironically, however, without having paid attention to gender differences while applying his theory to actual case study material, he draws many conclusions which he states represent the ''norm'' when in actuality he is describing men's experience. The environment is not a neutral, value-free system, and gender is perhaps the single most significant factor influencing its response (Noble, 1987). In this way the current cultural context is highly influential in determining what is deemed ''effective interaction'' by promoting competence for one gender, males, more consistently than for the other, females (Bernard, 1988; Wood & Karten, 1986).

The second aspect of competence motivation theory which differs from cultural notions of competence is the distinction drawn between competence and sense of competence. Even more important to self-esteem than the objective display of competence is the subjective self-assessment of one's competence, i.e., one's sense of competence (White, 1959). It is this internal assessment, which may be quite different from one's actual competence, which influences self-esteem. As sense of competence is the overall evaluation we form of our actual competence, it thus greatly influences what we will or will not attempt to do. A strong sense of competence can contribute to one's confidence in approaching a given situation again, or in approaching new situations. Similarly, failure can lead to a more pervasive lack of confidence or a decrease in one's sense of competence and, consequently, avoidance of a specific situation. One can display one's sense of competence through the confidence with which one approaches a situation. The telltale

indicator of the level of our self-esteem thus is our *internal* assessment of our competence — not our actual competence.

Sense of competence becomes an ever-increasing force in our lives. As a child we try things, seeking to find out what we can and cannot do, but as we grow older we make judgments about what we are capable of doing based on past experience, the response we receive from others, and our capacity to deal with failure. This process has consequences for the direction one's competence development will take. It is important for people to determine those areas in which they wish to develop their competence and those in which they will spend little energy. Such decisions are based in part on the reception individuals receive from the environment for their attempts to demonstate competence. According to White (1975), an inability to come to terms with the developmental task of making such life choices, for example selecting a career, handicaps not only the potential success of the person but his or her overall sense of competence as well.

Interposed between the external demonstration of "an urge toward competence" and the resulting internal assessment of one's competence is an important filter composed of society's perceptions, attitudes, and responses toward demonstrations of competence (Sternberg & Kolligian, 1990). White's criteria for evaluating sense of competence — the level of independence and independent choices a person is capable of formulating — as well as his criterion for interpersonal competence — the ability to influence others — require reformulation when applied to a woman's exercise of "independence," "choice," and "influence."

The foregoing analysis establishes that sense of competence and actual competence need not be the same. The evaluation from the environment about the "effectiveness" of our interactions influences our self-evaluation. For women, these "evaluations" are often conflicting and inconsistent. I am reminded of a situation in my graduate school department where two faculty members, one a man, the other a woman, each had a young child. When the woman rushed out in the afternoon to pick up her child from day care, the response from students, secretaries, and other faculty was to question whether or not she was adequately handling both her roles as mother and professor. When the male faculty member performed the same activity, the response from the women (regardless of position) was almost uni-

versally admiration for him for his involvement in his family despite his role as professor. His wife was envied for having such a supportive husband. The men did not respond publicly in this situation, whereas they, as well as the women, publicly doubted the competence and the ''femininity'' of the female faculty member. We can only assume from this that the man's sense of competence was enhanced through this interaction, whereas for the woman it brought her sense of competence into question.

The specific component of competence motivation theory that I will address in detail throughout the book is sense of competence. Theoretically, sense of competence is a fundamental component of self-esteem (White, 1975). According to White, *self-esteem* is our affective view of our ourselves. It is a combination of the many ways we feel about who we are as individuals. *Sense of competence* is our active view of ourselves — how we perceive ourselves acting within the environment (White, 1976). Although both of these concepts are closely related and blend together within the individual, sense of competence, unlike self-esteem, has visible components. One such visible component, anxiety, provides an important example of this distinction. Sense of competence and anxiety are inversely related (White, 1963). Consider, for example, the current understanding of agoraphobia, an anxiety disorder more commonly diagnosed in women than men (Pollard & Henderson, 1987). Historically agoraphobia, which means fear of open spaces, was thought to be a fear of outside places. The current understanding is that it is not a fear of a particular place that brings on the anxiety attack, but rather it is the agoraphobic individual's anxiety about having an anxiety attack in some particular place, e.g., while driving a car, that leads to avoidance. In other words it is her sense of incompetence to cope with an external situation which creates the anxiety and paralyzes the agoraphobic individual. This inverse relationship between anxiety and sense of competence is important to appreciate as another expression of the competence/femininity dilemma. Since sense of competence can be assessed by actual demonstrations of competence, low anxiety, and confidence, it has special merit as a concept for understanding personality development.

Sense of competence is also a useful concept, especially for women, when we think about the clinical applicability of this research (Lerman, 1986). It is much more useful than vague descriptions of low self-esteem, usually expressed by clients as ''feeling bad about

myself." Instead, when asked to speak about areas in their lives where they feel competent and about their sense of competence, most clients respond with a wealth of information and begin to have hope that there may in fact be a way to attack their overall sense of despair. The connection between a low sense of competence and feelings of depression (ineffectiveness) and anxiety was pointed out above. Helping people find ways to *feel* more competent will increase self-esteem. It may not be that their actual level of competence needs to change; rather, the missing link may be between what they do and how they assess what they do. Given the societal association between competence and masculinity, it is quite likely that for many women the neurogenic urge toward competence may be thwarted developmentally, with negative consequences for their sense of competence.

Competence Motivation Theory in the Context of Developmental Theory

By virtue of its universality and its relative novelty as a framework for examining adult development, the theory of competence motivation, while not intended to be an all-encompassing or exclusionary model for the development of children or adults, is clearly useful. For the study of adult females, competence motivation also has the appeal of being a more neutral concept than "need for achievement," "fear-of-success," or other gender- linked constructs. Competence motivation describes a biologically based urge which women and men both experience. How men and women are motivated to develop their sense of competence may conform to patterns that are gender related but not gender-specific, as other gender-sensitive research suggests about moral development or learning (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982). In other words, we may find patterns of development more accurately reflect one gender's development than the other's due to present sex-role stereotyping in our culture. I, however, assert that such patterns are culturally imposed rather than internally motivated: by the very fact that competence and femininity are perceived to be mutually exclusive, whereas competence and masculinity are perceived to be mutually inclusive, women's patterns for developing a positive sense of competence will differ from men's.

The opportunity to isolate, and potentially denigrate, women's

experience as opposite or not applicable to men's, can only be avoided by allowing women to tell their own story. Rather than holding either women or men up to a single "norm" which does not represent their experience, it is useful to explore the possibility that a variety of "norms" may exist depending on the factors examined (Norwood, 1987). In conjunction with other recent work on development which asks women to speak for themselves (Belenky, et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982), we are beginning to discover there are many ways of developing, all of which deserve to be considered "normal." Two areas of study that directly relate to competence motivation theory are McClelland's work on need for achievement and need for power, as well as the fear-of-success literature. These theories outline the specific saliency of competence in the life course. In comparing and contrasting competence motivation to these two areas, the preference for using a neurogenic theory of competence motivation as a way of assessing development, rather than a gender-linked construct, will become clear.

McClelland's theories of achievement and power motivation were initially based on the study of men's lives (McClelland, 1975; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953). In his studies McClelland explored different levels of motivation people had for achievement or power. He describes these as needs for achievement or power, and they are denoted as n Achievement and n Power. He found that high scores in these areas distinguished highly accomplished individuals from those less accomplished.

When women were studied, n Achievement did not prove useful for explaining women's motivation for accomplishment (Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980; McClelland, 1975). In McClelland's work on power (1975) he devotes a chapter to a discussion of "Power and the Feminine Role." He compares and contrasts women who are high in n Power with men high in n Power. One point McClelland makes is that women are not the opposite of men, and perhaps even the categories used to define male characteristics and behavior may not be appropriate for understanding women. He describes the difference between high n Power women and n Power men as being one of focus. Women high in n Power give their attention to their bodies and develop a sense of strength within themselves, whereas men high in n Power focus on treating others assertively or aggressively. The difference between how men and women choose to manifest their n Power appears to be very much in keeping with traditional "feminine" and "masculine" roles (Offer-

man & Schrier, 1985). It is also important to recognize the difference in focus between these two positions—one is outward and connected to the world and the other is inward and self-focused. Women's access to power in the world has traditionally been limited. What we see, then, is that women do have the need for power, but it may be expressed as control over themselves rather than as influence over others (Miller, 1987).

In contrast to McClelland's work, the fear-of-success (FOS) literature (Horner, 1972; Pederson & Conlin, 1987; Piedmont, 1988; Senchak & Wheeler, 1988; Tresemer, 1976a, 1976b), began as an exploration of female behavior in mixed-gender groups. Horner (1972) discovered that a much greater proportion of her female subjects expressed conflicted feelings about success than her male subjects, and these female subjects did in fact avoid success when placed in a competitive situation with men. She defined this phenomenon as the "fear of success." Horner's study precipitated much debate and controversy in the field. Tresemer (1976a) concluded that women have a tendency toward a slightly higher degree of FOS than men, but the difference is not statistically significant. He also found, however, that men and women attribute more "fear of success" to a successful woman than they do to a successful man. We can wonder what the long-term effects might be if everyone expects you to be afraid of success. For example, a female corporate vice-president may find that other people expect her to be full of self-doubt, thus preying on whatever seeds of self-doubt she may already have.

In a recent article Piedmont (1988) found that FOS can be altered by changes in the environment, such as situations in which men and women are competing directly. He also found that FOS is only applicable to women who also exhibit a strong achievement motivation; in other words, women have to want to be successful in order to fear it. He concludes that FOS does not describe men's motivation to avoid success because Horner's (1972) concept is based on the assumption that men and women are socialized to display their achievements in different arenas.

In contrast to these models of development, which rely on trait genderization to explain behavior, competence motivation, according to White (1959), is neurogenic. As such, it is universal and is important for the survival of the species. Achievement motivation, power motivation, and FOS describe important phenomena but are more limited in scope.

Since competence motivation is inherent to the species, the question is not one of high versus low competence motivation; rather, it is a question of the ways an individual is motivated to do particular things.

The interactive nature of competence is also compelling in that it changes the focus from cause and effect to the relationship between the person and the environment. While it is a universal phenomenon, its expression is influenced by such factors as culture, the historical period, and the economy (Fine, 1985). An important consequence of this biological-interactive perspective is that we can begin to formulate a different understanding of women's behavior. Consequently, we no longer need to choose between explanations based on political oppression and explanations based on inherent inferiority: "Women are oppressed by society, and therefore they are helpless victims," versus, "Women are lazy and use cries of oppression and discrimination to avoid hard work, when in fact the environment has treated them well." The question now becomes one of how women and the environment shape each other in systematic, institutionalized ways to create a situation in which perceptions of competence are linked to the male gender and in which women often restrict how they express their competence.

To understand how competence is shaped during our development we need to learn to think in terms of interaction. Although most of us have grown up thinking in terms of cause and effect, increasingly our understanding of knowledge is based on looking at interactions rather than looking at point A or point B. It is no longer $A \rightarrow B$, but rather $A \leftrightarrow B$. This is true in the physical sciences, medicine, social sciences, and communication theory. While it may be cumbersome at first, the value of thinking interactively becomes clear when we begin to delineate how to change the environment. We must think about how our perceptions influence our interactions with the environment and in turn how we are perceived by the environment.

The neurogenic urge toward competence stimulates the desire on the part of all individuals to develop a sense of competence. The interactive nature of this concept brings the individual face to face with society's perceptions regarding "competence." Both women and men learn that competence is a highly valued trait and that it is most frequently associated with "masculinity." Consequently greater opportunities exist for males to develop their sense of competence, which reinforces not only their pursuit of competence but their sex-role identity as well. The situation for women is more complex. If women pursue

their internal urge toward competence, they risk encountering opposition from society and being labeled "masculine." If women pursue their sex-role identity, they relinquish the opportunity to be seen as engaged in valuable, competent behavior. Faced with this choice, in the past many women have chosen the path of "appropriate" sex-role identity. The limited and constricted definition of femininity therefore also needs to be challenged.

What is Femininity?

Femininity, unlike competence, has definition *only* from the culture, not from theory. There are no standards of femininity; therefore femininity is open for definition. In reality, though, the cultural prescriptions about femininity (and masculinity) are very narrow and influential (Kierstead, D'Agostino, & Dill, 1988; Long, 1989). The significance of this narrow definition is born out by the fact that sex-role identity is one component of self-esteem (Robison-Awana, Kehle, & Jenson, 1986). Cultural messages influence a woman's determination of which of her achievements and attributes contribute to her femininity and which to her sense of competence. If she looks to society for the answer, she is likely to confront the other half of the competence versus femininity dilemma: sex-role socialization.

Recently, as the roles and choices available for many women have expanded, questions and research about the appropriate role for women in today's society have increased (Elman & Gilbert, 1984; Gilbert, Holahan, & Manning, 1981; Kandel, Davies, & Raveis, 1985; Sund & Ostwald, 1985). The rebirth of the women's movement found people questioning many assumptions upon which sex-role stereotypes were based. The difference between the sexes was explored from a new vantage point—environment versus heredity. Women's place in the psychology literature changed from explicit exclusion in studies of "man," to representation as a "minority," with both the oppression and specialness of the position articulated.

The landmark Broverman study (1972) brought attention to the fact that mental health clinicians associate stereotypically "masculine" traits with adult mental health. The adult female sex role was associated with poor mental health and low self-esteem. Some of the traits that defined femininity were "Very emotional," "Unable to separate feel-

ings from ideas," and "Very illogical." Therefore women who behave in sex-role appropriate ways, i.e., are feminine, lack self-esteem due to the fact that American society does not value women, women's work, or "feminine" traits.

Rather than this leading to a change in what is considered feminine, the traditional role for women expanded to include those associated with masculinity. The push was toward "having it all": babies *and* briefcases were heralded as the new and right accoutrements for a woman. In answer to *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963), the "Superwoman," was born. Thus, the importance of being sex-role appropriate for women never changed, but the limitations of being feminine were implicitly acknowledged by the assertion that satisfaction would derive from doing paid work. For a time it seemed that the answer to the famous question, "What do women really want?" had been found.

The problems with being a "Superwoman" are easily identified in the context of the competence/femininity dilemma. The woman attempts to fulfill a valued role associated with competence (and therefore masculinity) according to societal norms, as well as fulfill the feminine role according to sex-role norms in her personal life. At work she is the tough, assertive lawyer negotiating the contract, while at home she is the model wife and mother who cleans house and entertains friends. By juggling the demands of both roles and attempting to meet the expectations of others she hopes to achieve a high self-esteem. More recently what has been reported by and about these women and their lives is "burnout," divorce, depression, and "latch key children" (Greenglass, 1985; Stokes & Peyton, 1986). Trying to meet the expectations of two roles, especially those in conflict with each other, is clearly a burden with both psychological and physical dimensions.

The dichotomy between the "traditional" woman (one who exemplifies the feminine role) and the "Superwoman," or even more so the dichotomy between the "traditional" and the "career" woman (one who has foregone her femininity in pursuit of competence), is an artifact of social norms which pose competence and femininity as mutually exclusive (Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968). In her book *Femininity*, Susan Brownmiller (1984) discusses the conflict between femininity and ambition, an attribute she equates with masculinity and competence:

If prettiness and grace were the extent of it, femininity would not be a puzzle, nor would excellence in feminine values be so completely at odds with other forms of ambition. In a sense this entire inquiry has been haunted by the question of ambition, for every adjustment a woman makes to prove her feminine difference adds another fine stitch to the pattern: an inhibition on speech and behavior, a usurpation of time, and a preoccupation with appearance that deflects the mind and depletes the storehouse of energy and purpose. If time and energy are not a problem, if purpose is not a concern, if the underlying submissiveness is not examined too closely, then the feminine esthetic may not be a handicap at all. On the contrary, high among its known satisfactions, femininity offers a welcome retreat from the demands of ambition, just as its strategic use is often good camouflage for those wishing to hide their ambition from public view. But there is no getting around the fact that ambition is not a feminine trait. More strongly expressed, a lack of ambition — or a professed lack of ambition, or a sacrificial willingness to set personal ambition aside — is virtuous proof of the nurturant feminine nature which, if absent, strikes at the guilty heart of femaleness itself. (p. 221)

One potential path out of the guilt and conflict surrounding ambition and femininity is androgyny (Kapalka & Lachenmeyer, 1988). People who score "androgynous" also score high in self-esteem (Bem, 1976). Androgyny is defined as "the equal endorsement of both masculine and feminine personality characteristics" (1976, p. 51). The androgyny scale is composed of those components of "femininity" and "masculinity" that are valued by society. Potentially, then, androgyny provides an alternative for women between "masculinity" and high self-esteem and "femininity" and low self-esteem. In fact, however, it seems that high self-esteem is related to the "masculine" part of the androgyny profile and actually has little to do with having a combination of both "masculine" and "feminine" traits (Silvern & Ryan, 1983). The concept of androgyny, then, does not resolve this problem either. Because the environment is not androgynous, sex-role socialization is inherently tied to gender. Therefore, even though the psychological profile of an androgynous person is composed of the valued traits for males and females, the culture still values masculine traits more than feminine traits, and thus the truly damaging aspect of sex-role stereotyping is not redressed. Androgyny is a composite of current stereotypes, not a challenge to them.

Current research on women's development has identified positive aspects of female socialization, particularly women's relational capacities (Gilligan, 1982; Kaplan, 1983; Surrey, 1983), and yet it does not address femininity per se. Failure to integrate these findings into our notion of femininity is a mistake. Similarly to how the early position of the women's movement abandoned women who chose to be home-makers or to engage in other stereotypically female occupations by challenging male domains rather than promoting the value of work tradi-tionally performed by women, feminist researchers have tended to distance themselves from that which is labeled as feminine in this cul-ture. Just as with the "traditional" woman/"career" woman dichot-omy, we have the opposing stereotypes of the feminine "Cosmo" woman and the "bra-burning" feminist. Attempting to create a distance from femininity leaves women vulnerable to emulating and preferring that which is masculine. I recall, for example, a lecture presented by a female past-president of a professional psychological association to a women's psychology conference in which she discussed the increasing "feminization" of psychology. The audience almost audibly shuddered at her use of this term. This reaction can be understood in part by the fact that to date the more female dominated a profession is, the lower its status and salaries. But, it was also clear that these feminist women did not want to be associated with femininity.

Abandoning femininity or ignoring its existence as a cultural phenomenon is not the solution since women, like men, have the need to form a positive sex-role identity in order to develop healthy self-esteem. Allowing the female sex-role stereotype to be defined *for* women rather than *by* women breeds alienation, self-doubt, and even self-hatred as females, from childhood through adulthood, attempt to be feminine while simultaneously wrestling with their urge toward com-petence. Therefore, research on women's development must lead to a redefinition of femininity.

Background of This Study

It was with these concerns in mind that this work began. My research is one attempt to resolve the competence/femininity dilemma. Through theory building and a careful examination of women's lives, a new theory, *balancing*, is proposed for promoting self-esteem, one that

no longer views competence and femininity as mutually exclusive. Balancing is often used to describe juggling career and family, whereas I am proposing to use this term to describe an internal shift in how women construct their lives that increases their self-esteem, regardless of the specific components of their lives. This theory is heard in the voices of four particular women whose lives are examined in detail to illuminate the complexities of this dilemma, developmentally and currently in their lives. This theory offers a range of possibilities for women and moves beyond the painful, stuck place women find themselves in now where their urge toward competence is in conflict with their need for a positive sex-role identity, resulting in low self-esteem.

The design for this study grew out of two important experiences I had during the late 1970s. The first was reading the work of Robert White while in graduate school. I was drawn to his description of competence motivation and his studies of successful development, especially as described in *Lives in Progress: A Study of the Natural Growth of Personality* (1975). I have always had a strong interest in learning about what enables people to survive and thrive in their development. What are the conditions that help promote a positive sense of well-being for people? The concept of a neurogenic urge toward competence was therefore quite appealing to me as one factor in promoting growth. While reading White's work I was impressed by his inclusion of women, specifically "Joyce Kingsley," one of the three case studies in *Lives in Progress*, given that few psychologists were studying women in the 1950s when his work began. To read a case study about a woman that was not a clinical case filled with pathology was a rare treat at that time. As a feminist who had read extensively in the psychology of women literature, I was also sensitive to the discrepancy across his chapter headings for the three cases: "Hartley Hale, Physician and Scientist," "Joseph Kidd, Businessman," and "Joyce Kingsley, Housewife and Social Worker." The men are identified strictly by occupation, yet both are fathers and husbands. Kingsley is identified by both her personal and professional roles. At that point I began to wonder how generic White's model for competence development, "the need to select and narrow," actually was, since one possible interpretation of Kingsley's chapter heading could be her failure to narrow her motivation toward competence as completely as Hale and Kidd. I was stunned to find there was little since that point to challenge the perception of women as less com-

petent than men; in fact, there was some additional support (Broverman et al., 1972). This led me to interview women about their competence development and their sex-role identity while looking at the interaction between person and environment.

The second experience influenced which group of women I decided to interview. I was the student member on a search committee for a tenure position in my graduate school department. At that time there were no female faculty members either with tenure or in a tenure track slot in the department. It was the genuine desire of the committee to try to find a qualified woman for this position. After advertising in the usual way in the standard professional periodicals, the number of applications from women was small—at a time when more women than ever were receiving doctorates in psychology. At that point I began to wonder what happens to women who achieve competence in male-defined terms. What is their sense of competence? How do they feel about femininity? How have they negotiated the competence/femininity dilemma to enable them to succeed in the public arena? What were the developmental antecedents that helped them reach their present level of success? Most importantly, what was the relationship between being perceived as "competent" in a valued (masculine) endeavor and their internal experience of themselves in terms of femininity and sense of competence?

With this as the starting point, I elected to interview four female graduate students who were selected for me by their respective department chairmen as "the most competent woman in the department." The women were interviewed four times, three times during one year, and then once again, seven years later when they were in the early stages of their careers. (See Appendix for the interview questions.) The longitudinal aspect of this study, in addition to the inclusion of developmental histories, provides the opportunity to understand how women actually experience this dilemma across the lifespan.

The four women whose lives and experiences are depicted in great detail here are not intended to be "Everywoman." In fact, they were explicitly selected on the basis of their demonstrated competence in one particular arena, academics. Yet, as in a novel or biography, the intention is to illuminate, through an in-depth study of a few particular people, the ideas, struggles, and paradoxes that can touch many lives, and that speak to every person's experience (Mathews & Paradise, 1989; Stones, 1985).

As an outcome of listening to these women, I propose an alternative theory for developing a positive sense of competence, one that finally offers a possible resolution to the competence/femininity dilemma. Given that competence and femininity are perceived to be mutually exclusive in this society, while at the same time both are central to establishing a high self-esteem, this dilemma can seem unresolvable. The answer lies not in trying to make the pieces fit as they exist, but in changing the very ingredients of the dilemma. Both competence and femininity need to be redefined so they can be perceived as mutually inclusive. It is this redefinition that is essential to the successful achievement of balancing. Specific factors are identified that help lead toward balancing: developing a positive sense of competence and a positive sex-role identity. But there is no easy formula to follow. Balancing emphasizes the importance of *generalizing, diversifying,* and *integrating,* unlike White's model which focuses on specializing, narrowing, and selecting. The extent to which our social context does not permit, let alone encourage, balancing is great; at the same time it is clear that morally and economically our society can no longer support a culture in which half of the population is competent and the other half is feminine.