

# Challenging Organisations and Society

reflective hybrids®

## On the Move: Patterns, Power, Politics

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**Journal “Challenging Organisations and Society . reflective hybrids® (COS)”**

COS is the first journal to be dedicated to the rapidly growing requirements of reflective hybrids in our complex 21st-century organisations and society. Its international and multidisciplinary approaches balance theory and practice and show a wide range of perspectives in and between organizations and society. Being global and diverse in thinking and acting outside the box are the targets for its authors and readers in management, consulting and science.

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*Elizabeth Debold and Liselotte Zvacek*

## **Conversation with Elizabeth Debold and Liselotte Zvacek Depolarizing Gender: Questioning Stereotypes and Patterns that So Often Define Us**

**Liselotte:** We first met in Switzerland 2013 at your Workshop about archetypes and I was inspired by your clear description of power relations and how they are defined by the social constructs that emphasize the polarity of male and female. I especially felt this interrelation when imagining different male and female archetypes: the warrior and the princess, the king and the virgin, the hero and the mother. In the spring edition of the journal *evolve* ([www.evolve-magazin.de](http://www.evolve-magazin.de)) you spoke about the polarity of the genders and the myths that so often define us.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, the binary between male and female is polar—meaning they are seen as opposites—and they are in a hierarchical relationship with each other. The philosopher Jacques Derrida noted that in binary pairs, like male and female or black and white, we almost cannot help but make one dominant and the other subordinate. In the West, the hierarchy between male and female dates back at least to Aristotle. He said that, “Woman is more compassionate than man, more tearful, but at the same time more jealous, more apt to scold, more shameless, more prone to despondency, more deceptive. The male is more courageous and ready to help.” That’s a polarity right there: women are emotional, and, as he notes elsewhere, men are rational.

**Liselotte:** And today we experience that it is as if the image of women - or better the female side - is stereotypically stuck on the one side of the continuum. Let’s talk about that and find out why we are still in a world where these projections are alive.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, we have *human* qualities that have been divided into two groups and then assigned either to men or to women. Women get emotions,

nurturing, vanity, care, and relationship. Men get rationality, stoicism, dignity, assertiveness, and independence. The two are seen as mutually exclusive: what belongs to the masculine cannot also belong to the feminine. While the hierarchy between male and female dates back at least to Aristotle, this hierarchical polarity is, as you say, very much alive today. There are many reasons for this. One has to do with more recent history—with the development of Modernity in the West. At the end of the feudal era, when the old class or caste hierarchies were breaking down as the ruling class crashed with the birth of capitalism, culture began to be ordered by gender. This was a huge change. In the feudal era, your life was determined by the class of your birth more than anything else. Women and men had different roles within the different classes, but they weren't different kinds of people. With the advent of modernity, gender determined the range of what was possible in life: the public sphere of capitalism was for men and the private world of home was for women (and children). At the same time, human consciousness developed so that men and women, who were now believed to be opposite sexes, aspired to embody the polarity of masculinity or femininity. That meant that your self-esteem became based on whether you could live from half of your humanness. While this was pretty much impossible for both sexes, it was particularly difficult for women because to be feminine meant to be selfless, all-giving, perfect. No one can do that!

**Liselotte:** You are right, and I feel that perceptions of male and female appearance are engraved on our society, our social systems, our communication, our minds and hearts. A discussion about it will hopefully help to change the view about stereotypical gender perceptions. Lately awareness was raised in Europe by Tom Neuwirth, the creator of the artificial figure Conchita Wurst (female, with long hair and a beard) who won the Eurovision Song Contest. From the effect the figure Conchita has on individuals and public discourse we are happy that he doesn't challenge only Austria's tolerance and narrow perceptions through showing us a lady with a beard. ...

**Elizabeth:** Conchita Wurst is a delightful example of the increasing movement in culture to break down the gender polarity. I was really struck by what

Neuwirth did in creating his Conchita persona. By the way, he said that he was unaware of what he was doing, but the name “Conchita Wurst” is composed of two slang words, one for vagina and the other for penis! What’s new with Conchita Wurst is that instead of cross-dressing as a woman and, as often happens with transvestites, playing out being a hyper-feminine woman, this figure is neither and both masculine and feminine. When Conchita sings, Neuwirth doesn’t put on a falsetto but has his own voice, unaffected, that is almost not identifiable as male or female.

Since the 1960s, with the women’s liberation movement, there has been a growing movement toward gender fluidity. While most of us are a little bit shocked or taken aback by a Conchita Wurst or a little boy in a hot pink dress, we forget that women were the first to break the gender-appropriate clothing barrier. It took over a hundred years of agitation by radical women to make it acceptable for women to wear trousers in public. It seems so natural now!

Since the 60s we’ve also been questioning the values of the masculine public sphere and in some places have begun to argue that the “feminine” is better. You can see this in Northern Europe, for example. This flip toward valuing the feminine over the masculine both gives boys and men more space to explore other aspects of their humanity, which is creating more gender fluidity, and ends up turning the hierarchy on its head, which is not the point. Making women and the feminine superior to men and the masculine still holds the polarity in place.

The problem is the polarity. Sex difference doesn’t have to imply opposites or create hierarchy. When we make certain human qualities off limits for boys or girls, men or women, we make it impossible for any of us to be truly whole. Think about rationality and emotionality as an example. The blanket categorization of male/female, men/women within a polarity of rational/emotional—which implicitly means “irrational”—is a real problem for all of us. If we want to create a culture in which women and men are both responsible for caring and creating, aligning with either rationality or emotionality as core to one’s sense of maleness or femaleness is both misguided and self-defeating.

Yet this belief is hard to uproot in ourselves and in our culture, because for several thousand years at least, our philosophy, science, and psychology have asserted the truth of this fundamental difference. As Habermas says, culture is made up of shared intersubjective agreements that form the core assumptions that we have about self, other, and reality. These agreements are not conscious, yet they are encoded in language, enacted in the way we inhabit our bodies, and shared through habit and custom. The result is males who are too often cut off from their own feelings and females who too often shy away from rigorous intellectual engagement.

**Liselotte:** We have to be aware that especially today the influence of the mass media 24/7 in early childhood is huge – and has an effect on the unconscious and on the way the polarity is enlarged. The WHO reports that girls’ self-confidence is rapidly sinking – while in 2006 70% still felt a positive sense of embodiment, in 2012 it was only 43 percent. Girls live in a world of pink and emotions, reminded all the time that their appearance is important, being slim, being attractive, ... There are hardly any role-models that do not follow the dictatorship of beauty. Mattel started in 2000 to develop the character of princesses in fairy tales – there are princesses everywhere with a defined role – gentle and waiting for the male to marry her. The Gender Studies researcher Stevie Schmiedel founded an organization – Pinkstinks – to raise the awareness of “pinkification”, products that limit the female role in a specific way. Because there are not only princesses everywhere – for example the toy brand “Lego” is no longer for girls and boys as well, as it was in the 1960’s – there are specific series with a lot of mechanical and technical stuff for boys and pink castles and devices especially for girls. I think we are back in the world Aristotle described. I will even go further, to one of the stories children have been told for years in the Catholic world (still more than 50% of children in Austria are baptized) – Eve was made from one of Adam’s ribs. This has still a huge impact on the development of the polarity you mentioned.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, of course. Early childhood is the time that one’s gender identity is formed. Identity is a very complex concept. Psychologists don’t fully understand how we form identities—how much is biological or genetic? How

much is through the imprint of culture? At Harvard I did a lot of research into girls' development which was the subject of my book, *Mother Daughter Revolution*. Frankly, today I am far less concerned with young girls than I am with boys at this age. We know from research that the antagonism in the gender polarity is driven by males, not females. Many, if not most, boys' identities are threatened by being called a girl or doing something girly. This isn't true for girls. They may not like being called a boy, but they aren't threatened by it. On the whole, boys are more vulnerable than girls in early childhood. This has to do with the emotional and psychological cost to young boys of developing a male identity.

**Liselotte:** I know from my experience as consultant that especially when women climb the career ladder they suffer from the feminine attributions that are counter-productive for being selected for the top position. Anna Fels lists the traits that define femininity as "Yielding, loyal, cheerful, compassionate, shy, sympathetic, affectionate, sensitive to the needs of others, flatterable, understanding, eager to soothe hurt feelings, soft-spoken, warm, tender, gullible, childlike, not using harsh language, loves children and gentle." These social expectations limit our abilities to perform and live in the outside world of business, instead of helping us to be more like a presence of strength, generated in the here and now by the social situation, not by the sex.

**Elizabeth:** That's right. The feminine personality was not constructed to run a business but, instead, to care for children and be a man's helpmate. More than this, though, as psychologist Jean Baker Miller points out in her classic *The New Psychology of Women*, the qualities granted to the feminine are very, very similar to the qualities and behaviors that we expect from subordinates. Subordinates are very relational, very tuned into the habits and moods of the dominant, and very eager to please. While being attuned to others can be helpful to a leader, these characteristics are the opposite of what it takes to step out and aspire to lead. Speaking of opposites, the polar opposition with masculinity adds another whammy to this equation. Women are considered "unfeminine" when they act as leaders. In fact, a 2013 study by researchers Monica Schneider and Angela Bos found that when individuals were asked

to identify the traits associated with women in political office, only 39% even characterized them as “leaders,” while 93% described male politicians that way. Female politicians were seen as possessing neither positive leadership traits usually considered masculine nor positive interpersonal skills usually considered feminine. Moreover, they were far more likely than men to be perceived as “uptight” or “dictatorial,” and rarely were viewed as being either compassionate or sensitive, which were identified as typical female qualities.

**Liselotte:** As a biologist I am intrigued by recent biological studies that show that even the biological definition of male and female has to be seen as a continuum, and the genes that are responsible for hormone production are not only located on the X and Y chromosomes as Heinz-Jürgen Voß describes in his research. It is altogether a construct we produce socially in our front brain. He tells us about studies with different outcome if you divide the participants before experiments or after into a male and a female group.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, neuroscientists like Cordula Fine, author of *Delusions of Gender*, and Lise Eliot, author of *Pink Brain, Blue Brain*, show that we are extremely sensitive to gender expectations. Experiments end up having radically different results when subtle cues are given about gender. Yet, these things are so engrained that it requires enormous self-awareness even to be aware of these biases, let alone transcend them.

**Liselotte:** Yes, I became aware from my own experience that it needs deep processing. During the meditation with you, as I mentioned earlier, slipping into the female archetypes was very deeply rooted: the virgin, the female lover, the mother and the witch. My actual feelings during this specific exercise changed my perception dramatically – for the first time I felt the restrictions most of the female archetypes had towards the felt connection to and perception of my abilities. I had less access to my abilities and resources through the filters of archetypes. Where did the strong feeling of knowledge, experiences and abilities go? I felt like I was captured in a cage and was only defined by the male counterpart. Disconnected from myself. What does it mean to be contextualized only as a counterpart?

**Elizabeth:** Exactly. We then look for our sense of self and worth in the eyes of others. One thing that I find dangerous is how much we are trying to pin cultural and social differences on biology. It gives us a way out of really doing the heavy lifting of culture change together. Take testosterone as an example. We tend to think that this “male” hormone is the reason for men’s greater competitiveness and leadership. But testosterone levels are not something that only males have, and they are subject to enormous variation and responsive to different social contexts.

**Liselotte:** And even one half of a human being’s testosterone is influenced by the testosterone level of the mother’s organism during pregnancy. The other half is contextually, epigenetically shaped, as we learn from results of Helen Fisher’s research.

Hormones, the image and awareness of the body are topics we should look closer at or even focus on.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, because hormone research shows a different story than we’d expect. Men who are responsible for taking care of children, for example, have significantly lower testosterone levels than men who are not. We don’t hear much about the women who, without medical intervention, have higher base levels of testosterone than the average male. Recent research on elite athletes reported in *Clinical Endocrinology* noted that higher testosterone levels don’t lead to better performance.

Our habit of seeing, expecting, and wanting to find gender differences too often guides the interpretation of very complicated brain research. As neuroscientist Cordelia Fine, author of *Delusions of Gender*, observes, “Our minds are exquisitely socially attuned, and surprisingly sensitive to gender stereotypes.” Even in experiments, when researchers “push gender into the psychological background, men and women’s behavior becomes remarkably similar,” Fine explains. “But when the environment makes gender salient, even subtly, . . . our thinking, our behavior, the way we perceive others and even our own selves becomes more consistent with gender stereotypes.”

**Liselotte:** This touches our deepest understanding and feelings of the very slow change in our perceptions concerning male and female attributions and co-existence. And it is so much connected to how we took our steps into this world, how we are socialized: I for instance had all chances for development given by my parents. My father supported my strong, powerful, hard-working side: for example I carried concrete with my little bucket to help him building our weekend house in the country, was dressed like a bricklayer, fitting into the atmosphere of a building place, wore hardly any dresses and had short hair. He also challenged me to take a shower at the little river waterfall near the house after work. The water was about 8 degrees Celsius and I liked the cold water on my skin and the burning feeling when my skin got warm again. I loved the anxious face my mother made before we went. I loved to join the farmer's boys from the farm on top of the mountain to cut trees in the woods and I felt as strong as they were with their motor saw and the other tools they had, and I was able to use them as well. My life during the week in town was different - my mother tried to convince me to wear dresses and behave more like a girl, playing with dolls (and Lego BRICKS) with other children, doing handicrafts and cooking food. The boy next door was a coward, shy and not really strong, I was the one who helped him several times when he was afraid and the girls next door were up with me in the trees and doing sports. Both worlds seemed to be fitting for me – and I didn't even feel it like different worlds. So the gender bias didn't really exist in my small world. The world offered possibilities and I was open to the possibilities.

Meditation and presencing made me very thankful for being brought up as I was. Having felt how I could have felt, restricted and not daring to ask for what I want. I felt the male-female forms and realities more like a continuum and I still do, having access to life more than 40 years later.

**Elizabeth:** You are very lucky! I saw a great TED Talk by iO Tillett Wright, a photographer, called "Fifty Shades of Gay," where she took photos of people and asked them to identify where they were on a continuum between 100% heterosexual and 100% homosexual. Most people feel that they fall somewhere in between. The same is true, as you see in your own experience, for

the supposed polarity of masculine and feminine. Most of us are in between somewhere. However, despite the fact that we know we aren't the ideal, for most of us it unconsciously is the reference point by which we judge ourselves. We need to go deeper than the mind to find a new, genderless ground of self. I think this is what you mean by meditation and presencing. Consciousness, Spirit, Presence have no gender. Rooted in this as our deepest selves, all of these constructs become transparent to us so that we can make different choices and not just act out of them. At some point, hopefully not too far in the future, we will realize that the sex that we are born with is arbitrary—like being left- or right-handed.

**Liselotte:** Good point – and I think here we have a good example of how easily discrimination ended with one generation and is no longer a topic. My mother was very happy that I, as a left-handed little girl, wanted myself to learn to write with my right hand. Teachers stopped forcing children to change their writing hand but she was still afraid that I would be treated differently at school being left-handed, from her own experience in the 1930ies. So we could be confident with our topic, too.

**Elizabeth:** The gender polarity is so ubiquitous that it's like water to fish. We swim in it. Now we have to figure out how to change the water in the fish tank while we are the fish. It's daunting, but it's also possible—if we realize how much we need to get beyond it. The polarity constructs both our culture and identities, and limits what we can think and be. It obscures our perceptions of a whole range of experiences, also making it difficult to see and support each other in ways that run counter to type. We need each other's full humanity, not half of it. Habits of thinking and relating in terms of polarities are too primitive for the complexity of our lives. Developing our capacity for thinking beyond the binary and our awareness of the depth of self beyond the conditioned mind can change the reality in which we find ourselves.

**Liselotte:** So we will no longer approach human beings with readymade mindmaps but in the awareness of the here and now. I think to learn more in the here and now through different approaches of presencing as individual,

in groups, in organizations in the media is one important way to see human beings, their actions, and how they can contribute to our society. Co-creating a world we all want to live in, living our potential and finding new solutions for the betterment of our world, for our planet.

Elizabeth, thank you so much for this interesting conversation.

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