



Brief report

Temperamental traits of women applying for a type of job that has been characterized historically by male identity The military career as case study

Icro Maremmanni ^{a,b,*}, Liliana Dell'Osso ^a, Luca Rovai ^a, Gualberto Arduino ^c,
Angelo Giovanni Icro Maremmanni ^{a,b}, Elisa Schiavi ^a, Giulio Perugi ^{a,b},
Kareen Akiskal ^e, Hagop S. Akiskal ^d

^a Department of Psychiatry, University of Pisa, Italy

^b G. De Liso Institute of Behavioural Sciences, Pisa, Italy

^c Italian Air Force, Rome, Italy

^d International Mood Center, University of California and Veterans Administration Hospital, San Diego, California, USA

^e International Mood Center, University of California, USA

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ABSTRACT

Background: Over the past fifty years in the Western world the professions and activities that were once practised only by males, are now available to females, too. Affective temperaments, in line with their adaptive function, influence career choices. In general, males and females have proved to have different temperamental profiles. In this study we inquire into the question whether gender differences in temperament have continued unchanged in a field, such as the military career, that has been historically characterized by a male identity.

Methods: 1426 males and 122 females wishing to become a cadet in the Italian Air Force were tested using TEMPS-A[P] (the Temperament Evaluation of Memphis, Pisa, Paris and San Diego self-questionnaire, Pisan version).

Results: Univariate and multivariate analyses failed to distinguish males from females. Both males and females tend to have a high score on the hyperthymic scale (generally, a typical male temperament) and a very low one on the cyclothymic scale (generally, a typical female temperament), with low scores on the depressive and the irritable scales.

Conclusions: This study supports the idea that different gender-related temperaments are functional to differences in the roles played by males and females during the biological and social evolutionary process.

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1. Introduction

Over the past fifty years in the Western world we have witnessed a far-reaching a great process of equalization of rights between men and women, so that the professions and activities that were once the prerogative of males are now

available to females, too. Despite this, men and women continue to differ in several areas and from several points of view.

From a medical point of view, differences are clearly apparent in somatic medicine and in psychology/psychiatry.

Regarding somatic medicine, most of the diseases that afflict our species shows sex-related differences, both in epidemiological and in clinical features (Alt et al., 2005). For example, the cardiac diseases (Akishita, 2009) are more frequent in males, whereas the rheumatic ones are more common in females (Takabayashi, 2005).

* Corresponding author. "Santa Chiara" University Hospital, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pisa, Via Roma, 67 56100 PISA, Italy. Tel.: +39 0584 790073; fax: +39 0584 72081.

E-mail address: maremmanni@med.unipi.it (I. Maremmanni).

There are differences too in psychiatry, especially in the wide field of affective disorders: the bipolar disorder in men and women often differs in prevalence, age of onset, longitudinal course, comorbidity and clinical presentation. With regard to bipolar I disorder, which is equally distributed in males and females, men report mania at the onset of illness more often than women, with an earlier age of onset and a more frequent history of childhood antisocial behaviour. Men also have higher rates for the comorbid obsessive-compulsive disorder, alcohol and substance abuse dependence, pathological gambling and conduct disorder. Finally they are more likely to report legal problems and behavioural problems. On the other hand, women report higher rates of comorbid eating disorders and panic disorder, and more frequently than men present rapid cycling, mixed episodes, and a history of attempts to commit suicide (Kessing, 2004; Kawa et al., 2005; Kennedy et al., 2005; Benedetti et al., 2007). Furthermore, women with bipolar mania exhibit a specific pattern of psychotic symptoms, characterized by more delusions of reference, paranoid delusions and hallucinations, which appear to be associated with greater severity of the current episode, and a more severe course of illness (Braunig et al., 2009). With regard to bipolar II disorder, which is more common in females, women have lower age at onset, report higher rates of comorbid eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder, and more often than men present rapid cycling, atypical depressions, mixed depression, and a family history of suicidal behaviour (Baldassano et al., 2005; Benazzi, 2006). Considering types I and II together, in medium-term follow-up studies, females appear to undergo a higher risk of recurrence than males. They present a greater prevalence of depression and rapid cycling, and are more likely to have a worse outcome, with a chronic recurrent course and longer episodes (Usall et al., 2001; Suominen et al., 2009).

Men and women are different in their psychology (Seiden, 1976a,b): moving from the field of pathology to the field of normality, important differences between genders emerge in temperamental profiles, in life activities, in personal ambitions and attitudes.

Let's focus attention on temperaments that are deeply involved in human activities. On the classical interpretation, based on Kraepelin's observations, they are lifelong, attenuated, subclinical forms of manic-depressive illness (Kraepelin, 1921). On the other hands, Akiskal and his collaborators recently formulated the hypothesis of an adaptive role (Akiskal and Akiskal, 2005a,b; Akiskal and Akiskal, 2007), so that the question of the nature of affective temperaments is still an open issue.

Males and females proved to be different in their temperamental profiles, as measured by the Akiskal and Mallya criteria (Temperament evaluation of Memphis, Pisa, Paris and San Diego), both in interviews (TEMPS-I) and in the autoquestionnaire (TEMPS-A) version: with greater frequency men show a hyperthymic and irritable temperament, whereas females display a cyclothymic, depressive and anxious one (Cassano et al., 1992; Placidi et al., 1998; Preti et al., 2010).

Sex differences have also been examined in Cloninger's temperament dimensions by means of the Tridimensional

Personality Questionnaire (TPQ) and Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI). Women score higher in reward dependence and harm avoidance (Miettunen et al., 2007). In particular, this latter observation is consistent with data obtained on TEMPS scales, because the harm avoidance dimension appears to be directly linked to depressive and cyclothymic temperaments, which prevail in women, and are inversely linked to hyperthymia, which prevails in men (Maremmi et al., 2005).

It was shown recently that affective temperaments, in line with their adaptive function, influence career choices. When critical attention has been focused on professionals and students, it has been possible to map out the temperamental and personality profiles of different professions.

Lawyers and physicians turn out to receive high ratings on dysthymic temperament. Managers, entrepreneurs and journalists receive very high ratings on the hyperthymic scale, together with low ones on the cyclothymic one. Architects and artists seem to benefit from being cyclothymic (Akiskal et al., 2005).

The relationship between professional choice and affective temperament has also been demonstrated in students. Law and art students present a cyclothymic or irritable temperament, engineering students express a hyperthymic one. Psychology and nursing students show predominantly depressive and anxious temperaments. Medical students have the least extreme results in temperament scores and frequencies (Figueira et al., 2010).

More generally, what should be stressed is the role of the depressive temperament in taking care, the role of cyclothymic temperament in creativity, and the role of hyperthymic temperament in leadership (Akiskal and Akiskal, 2005a,b; Akiskal and Akiskal, 2007; Strong et al., 2007; Maremmi et al., 2010).

The military career seems to be the most typically male. In Italy women were accepted into the ranks of armies only a few years ago. One incisive factor here is undoubtedly the close connection between military life and leadership issues. We have noted that those who make the attempt to become a cadet officer in the Italian Air Force have mainly shown a hyperthymic temperament combined with extremely low scores on the cyclothymic scale (Maremmi et al., 2010).

In this study we raise the question whether gender differences in temperament still persist in a field, such as the military career, which has been characterized historically by a male identity. More provocatively, we wonder if women who attempt to enter typically male professions are characterized by a male temperamental profile.

2. Methods

2.1. Design of the study

This is an observational case-control study comparing the affective temperaments of men and women applying to become a cadet officer in the Italian Air Force. All the applicants were evaluated during the entrance exam to the Italian Air Force Academy in Rome, Italy, during the year 2005. All these subjects signed an agreement to be tested. The decision to administer the test was taken by the Italian military command according to a research project to identify

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