

Gender Roles and Self-Esteem: A Consideration of Environmental Factors

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Much empirical research has examined the psychological well-being of individuals with varying gender role orientations. This research has typically shown masculinity to be a strong correlate of self-esteem and femininity to be relatively unrelated to self-esteem. This research has often failed to consider the relative environmental influences impacting this process. This study examines the relationships of masculinity and femininity to self-esteem and environmental presses for each of these sets of behavioral characteristics. Results indicate a stronger press for masculine characteristics than feminine characteristics. The person-environment interaction suggests that a masculine environment may place women who are low in masculinity at particular risk for low self-esteem. Implications for both research and practice are discussed.

Thirty years ago, gender roles was a topic barely worthy of study. It was simply assumed that men followed one role and women another. The women's movement and later the men's movement partially resulted in redefining the concepts of gender identity and gender roles. Interest in studying gender roles has to some extent followed a growing national trend towards questioning assumptions made about appropriate attitudes, behaviors, and personality characteristics for men and women (Mintz & O'Neil, 1990). Empirical research on gender roles has often attempted to understand the consequences of such a redefinition through examining the psychological well-being of individuals with varying gender role orientations (see Cook, 1987; Whitley, 1983).

In the 1970s, researchers thought that a greater degree of psychological well-being would be associated with an androgynous orientation. Indeed, Bem (1974, p. 162) suggested that androgyny may define a "more human standard of mental health." Researchers during this time attempted to demonstrate that androgynous individuals would have greater self-esteem and overall better psychological adjustment than would individuals who adhered to more traditional gender roles (see Cook, 1985; Whitley, 1983). Empirical studies, however, did not support such predictions (see Whitley, 1983); instead, a "masculinity model" was developed to account for the better adjustment associated with masculinity (Adams & Sherer, 1985). In most of these studies, when the gender-by-gender role interaction was considered, results usually showed androgynous women as more well-adjusted than feminine women, but androgynous men's adjustment as equal to that of masculine men (Silvern & Ryan, 1979). Two meta-analyses found this pattern to be particularly true for measures of self-esteem (Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Whitley, 1983). This in turn led researchers to conclude that masculinity was the active factor for both men and women. Cook later suggested that research showing masculinity as more strongly related to self-esteem than femininity was "one of the most stable findings to emerge from androgyny research" (1987, p. 476, 477). Thus, research has run counter to the initial hypotheses of gender-role researchers.

The three major explanations offered for masculinity's greater impact on self-esteem have been (a) biased or inadequate instruments of operational definitions used to assess gender roles, (b) a possible masculine bias in the choice of global well-being measures, and (c) the notion of a large-scale cultural bias towards masculinity. Regarding the first explanation, the social desirability of the subscales of

gender role measures has been called into question by Pedhazur and Tetenbaum (1979). They argued that the item content of the masculinity scales was more socially desirable than that of the femininity scales. Although this is still a controversial topic, Taylor and Hall (1982) concluded that there is no systematic difference in the social desirability of these two constructs as measured by the two most widely used instruments, the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974). Furthermore, Spence and Helmreich (1978) maintained that the PAQ assesses instrumentality and expressiveness rather than masculinity and femininity per se. Thus, social definitions of these constructs may differ.

With respect to choices of well-being measures used in these studies, some have argued that the type of well-being assessed in some measures may be biased towards masculinity (see Whitley, 1983). One recent study (Sharpe & Heppner, 1991) found evidence for two independent areas of well-being. The authors labeled these "traditional well-being" and "affiliative well-being." Traditional well-being included constructs such as self-esteem, anxiety, and depression and was most strongly associated with masculinity. Affiliative well-being included measures of intimacy and a lack of conflict due to competition and emotional restriction and was most strongly associated with femininity. Thus, this research has shown preliminary support for the notion that there may be more than one dimension of psychological well-being and that these may be differentially associated with masculinity and femininity. Self-esteem may be more directly associated with masculinity, whereas femininity is associated with perhaps less traditional measures of well-being, such as intimacy and relationship satisfaction.

The last explanation, that of a cultural bias toward masculinity, has been termed the *masculine supremacy effect* (Cook, 1985; Yager & Baker, 1979). This argument posits that masculinity simply has greater social utility in American culture (Yager & Baker, 1979). More specifically, this position suggests a cultural bias toward masculinity such that individuals who are masculine receive more positive social reinforcement and hence develop higher self-esteem. This last explanation has not been tested, and it is the subject of the current study.

Until now, the focus of gender role research has been on masculinity and femininity as personality or trait variables almost to the exclusion of environmental or situational influences. In other areas

of psychological research, it is readily assumed that environmental influences play a large part in determining behavior. With respect to gender role research, Cook (1985) suggested that an analysis of person-by-environment interactions should replace a focus on personal variables alone. More specifically, this would suggest that individual masculinity and femininity be studied within their social context. Given that the environment provides powerful cues about how an individual ought to behave, as well as the fact that masculinity and femininity are largely social constructions (Scher & Good, 1990), an examination of environmental presses for masculinity and femininity could provide additional information about the relationship between gender roles and psychological well-being. The term *environmental press* is defined here as the implicit and explicit cues an individual receives from others about how he or she should think, feel, and behave. In the context of this investigation, those cues will be directly related to the constructs of masculinity and femininity.

The purpose of this study was to examine the interaction between personal masculinity and femininity and social (or environmental) presses for masculinity and femininity. Specifically, the study examined whether participants would report feeling greater social pressure to demonstrate masculine characteristics than feminine characteristics. In addition, because the study examined both personal and environmental variables, the mutual influence of these two variables was studied, particularly in line with Cook's suggestion of the person-by-environment interaction. In accordance with previous research, the first hypothesis predicted that individual masculinity would be more strongly related to self-esteem than individual femininity. Furthermore, as theorized by the masculine supremacy effect (Cook, 1985), the second hypothesis predicted that participants would rate the environmental press for masculinity as stronger than the press for femininity. Finally, the third hypothesis predicted that there would be a person-by-environment interaction such that participants low in personal masculinity living in an environment high in demand for masculinity would have the lowest self-esteem. Given that the relationship between individual femininity and self-esteem is usually not statistically significant, no predictions were made about a person-by-environment interaction with respect to femininity. Because the results for the three hypotheses might differ for men and women, analyses were conducted on the total sample as well as separately for each sex.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for the study consisted of 236 undergraduate students (90 male and 146 female) at a large midwestern university. Participants were mostly freshmen and sophomores, and 90% were between the ages of 17 and 22 years. Students took part in the study either for extra credit or in partial fulfillment of a course requirement.

Instrument

The Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) was employed to assess participants' individual sex-role orientations. Instructions on this form state, "The items below inquire about what kind of person you think you are . . . You are to choose the number which you think best describes where you fall on the scale." The PAQ yields three scores based on eight items each: an individual masculinity (IM) score, an individual femininity (IF) score, and a masculinity-femininity (M-F) score. Items on each scale are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from 0 to 4, such that scores on each scale may range from 0 to 32. All items for the IM and IF

scales were rated as ideal for both men and women, but significantly more typical of one sex than the other (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Thus, the IM scale assesses stereotypical masculine qualities such as independence and competitiveness, and the IF scale assesses stereotypical feminine qualities such as warmth and devotion to others (Spence & Helmreich, 1978). The M-F scale has not been widely used in research and was not scored in this study.

The PAQ has adequate internal consistency, with alpha coefficients of .85, .82, and .78 for the M, F, and M-F scales (Wilson & Cook, 1984). In this study, alpha coefficients for the M and F scales were .74 and .75. Test-retest reliability is approximately .60 over a 2.5-month period (Yoder, Rice, Adams, Priest, & Prince, 1982). Construct validation of the PAQ has usually consisted of correlating scores on the IM scale to typical masculine traits such as competitiveness (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and the type-A behavior pattern (Stevens, Pfost, & Ackerman, 1984); scores on the IF scale have been related to typical feminine traits such as nurturance (Bem, Martyna, & Watson, 1976) and placing value on the socioemotional aspects of life (Shichman & Cooper, 1984). The PAQ also shows moderate correlations with other measures of masculinity and femininity (see Cook, 1985).

The Personal Attributes Questionnaire-Environmental form (PAQ-env) was employed to assess environmental presses for masculinity and femininity. Instructions on the PAQ-env stated, "The following is a list of the same characteristics you just completed about yourself . . . now you are to rate those same characteristics according to how you feel other students encourage or reward you to exhibit each of these characteristics." Internal consistency for the modified PAQ was assessed in this study. Alpha coefficients on the PAQ-env M and F scales were .78 and .84.

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI; Coopersmith, 1967) is a 25-item, self-report measure of self-esteem. *Self-esteem* is defined here as an individual's evaluation of him- or herself as a person, and is an expression of general approval or disapproval of the self (Coopersmith, 1967). Participants respond to each item on a 2-point scale as *like me* or *unlike me*. Scores on the SEI range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem. The adult form, which was used in this study, is a modified version of the more broadly used school form, from which most of the psychometric estimates have been developed. The correlation between these two forms is approximately .80 ($N = 647$; Coopersmith, 1967). The alpha coefficient for the adult form is .75 (Ahmed, Valliant, & Swindle, 1985). The alpha coefficient obtained in this study was .81. Test-retest reliability is approximately .88 over a 5-week period (Coopersmith, 1967). Convergent validity for the SEI was demonstrated by showing a positive correlation with other self-report measures of self-esteem and with peer ratings (Demo, 1985). Additionally, scores on the SEI were found to correlate positively with ego strength and negatively with anxiety, providing support for both convergent and discriminant validity (Kawash, 1982).

Procedure

Participants completed the PAQ, the PAQ-env, and the SEI in groups of 25 to 50. Each participant received a packet containing the instruments and a consent form. Administration time was approximately 30 minutes. After participants had completed the instruments, they received a page of debriefing information.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics on all variables are presented in Table 1. The means suggest that overall, participants' appraisal of their individual

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables

Variable	n	Men		n	Women	
		M	SD		M	SD
Individual						
masculinity	90	21.97	5.10	145	20.12	4.07
individual femininity	90	22.80	4.26	146	25.13	3.91
Press for masculinity	88	22.35	5.60	145	22.61	5.09
Press for femininity	89	19.85	5.49	144	21.43	5.89
Self-esteem	90	78.00	16.20	146	70.93	19.27

Note. Individual masculinity and femininity = Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ, Spence et al., 1974); press for masculinity and femininity = Personal Attributes Questionnaire-Environment (PAQ-env); self-esteem = Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI, Coopersmith, 1967). Higher scores indicate greater amounts of masculinity, femininity, environmental presses for masculinity and femininity, and self-esteem.

masculinity ($M = 20.83$), individual femininity ($M = 24.24$), and self-esteem ($M = 43.33$) were typical of other college student samples (see Sharpe & Heppner, 1991; Zeldow, Clark, & Dougherty, 1985).

Examination of the correlation matrix (represented in Table 2) revealed that individual masculinity was significantly correlated with self-esteem for the total sample ($r = .55, p < .001$) as well as within each sex (men: $r = .58, p < .001$; women: $r = .52, p < .001$). Individual femininity scores, however, were not significantly correlated with self-esteem across the total sample or within either sex (all $p < .05$). Thus, as predicted, the relationship of masculinity to self-esteem was significantly higher than that of femininity to self-esteem, $t(232) = 5.81, p < .01$. Thus, the first hypothesis was confirmed.

Examination of the means for environmental presses for masculinity and femininity (see Table 1) revealed that participants reported feeling a greater press for masculine characteristics ($M = 22.51$) than for feminine characteristics ($M = 20.83$). T tests conducted on the means for the environmental press variables have revealed that these differences were statistically significant across the total sample, $t(230) = 4.13, p < .001$, as well as for men, $t(87) = 3.61, p < .001$, and women, $t(142) = 2.28, p < .05$, separately. Thus, the second hypothesis was accepted.

Finally, to test the combined influence of environmental factors with trait variables, a 2 (high versus low individual masculinity) \times 2

(high versus low press for masculinity) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. A significant main effect was obtained for individual masculinity, $F(1,231) = 33, p < .001$, but not for the environmental press for masculinity, $F(1,231) = 2.57, p = .11$. Moreover, the interaction was also significant, $F(1,231) = 4.10, p < .05$; hence main effects will not be further interpreted. Planned contrast statements on the total sample revealed that those low in individual masculinity who reported a strong environmental press for masculinity had the lowest self-esteem, $t(228) = 2.56, p < .01$. Follow-up analyses with separate ANOVAs conducted for each sex revealed that the individual by environment interaction was significant for women, $F(1,143) = 5.27, p < .05$, but not for men, $F(1,87) = .27, p < .05$. Again the same pattern was observed; women low in masculinity reporting an environment that encouraged high amounts of masculinity, had the lowest self-esteem. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was partially confirmed. The 2 (high-versus-low individual femininity) \times 2 (high-versus-low press for femininity) ANOVA revealed no significant main effects or interactions, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

This study found evidence in support of a masculine bias in American society, such that individuals who possess a larger amount of masculine characteristics such as decisiveness, independence, and competitiveness report greater self-esteem than do those with less of those traits. Consistent with past research (e.g., Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Whitley, 1983), individual masculinity was significantly correlated with self-esteem for both men and women, but individual femininity was not significantly related to self-esteem in either sex. This pattern of results support what has been termed the *masculinity model* (Cook, 1987; Whitley, 1983) as an explanation for the relation of gender roles to psychological well-being.

The correlates of masculinity—goal directedness, high achievement motivation, competitiveness, and assertiveness—are traits highly valued in this culture (Kenworthy, 1979; Locksley & Colten, 1979). The results of this study confirm those findings on a more personal level. Specifically, the results suggest that for both men and women, environmental presses to meet or live up to this definition of masculinity were significantly greater than for femininity. Even though participants in another study rated the ideal person as more feminine than masculine (Silvern & Ryan, 1979), participants in this study felt that their peers encouraged achievement, competition, and independence more so than sensitivity, emotional expressiveness, and satisfaction in relationships.

Moreover, within this high press for masculinity, the person-by-environment interaction suggests that, especially for women, those low in individual masculinity were at a particular risk for decreased self-esteem. When in an environment considered high in masculinity, these women reported the lowest self-esteem scores of any group. Because the culture places a high value on masculine or instrumental characteristics, those individuals who show these traits perhaps receive more respect from others and hence enjoy greater self-esteem than individuals who display fewer of these masculine traits.

In short, this study suggests that gender roles, which were previously studied in isolation from environmental influences, are embedded within a cultural context that can interact with one's personal traits. Counselors involved in exploring gender issues with their clients may also want to attend to the characteristics of the environment within which their clients function. Our results suggest that it is perhaps most important to do so with women. Counseling orientations such as systems theory and feminist theory place a strong emphasis

TABLE 2
Correlation Matrix of Self-Esteem Inventory With PAQ and PAQ-env

PAQ	Self-Esteem Inventory		
	Total ($N = 236$)	Men ($n = 90$)	Women ($n = 90$)
Individual masculinity	.55**	.58**	.52**
Individual femininity	.00	.11	.02
Press for masculinity	.11*	.25*	.05
Press for femininity	.15*	.19*	.17*

Note. See Table 1 note.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

on situational and cultural factors, and hence may provide useful interventions for dealing with clients who experience distress due to a lack of congruence with their environment. The practice of a new form of counseling, called *gender aware therapy* (see Good, Gilbert, & Scher, 1990) may be particularly useful for this type of work.

Several limitations should be considered in generalizing the results of this study. First, the methodology for assessing environmental presses was new and merits additional examination and replication. The modification of the PAQ to assess participants' perceptions of what other students encouraged or rewarded in them may have only narrowly tapped a broader, more general environmental press (a college environment is a fairly instrumental environment where goal directedness and achievement is directly rewarded). Given the situational variability of human behavior, other modifications of the PAQ to assess a broader spectrum of environments may produce different results. Future research in this area should perhaps assess environmental factors across several situations (e.g., work, home, school) as well as across different populations and cultures. Second, it is also unclear to what extent freshmen, new to the university (48% of our sample), can accurately and reliably assess environmental presses as they were asked to do in this study. We did several post-hoc analyses, however, and found that separating the sample into freshmen and upperclassmen did not significantly alter any of the reported results. Third, the operational definitions of masculinity and femininity used in this study represent only one conceptualization of these emotionally laden constructs (see Spence & Helmreich, 1978). These definitions deserve more attention, which may lead to a more complex conceptualization of sex-related constructs. Finally, no account was made for self-presentation or social desirability effects, particularly with respect to self-esteem. Given that participants were assessing the effects of their environment, it may make sense to control for sensitivity to these pressures in future studies.

CONCLUSION

This study provides preliminary confirmation of a masculine bias in American culture. Initial investigation of environmental factors suggests they may be useful sources of information when examining sex roles and psychological well-being. Our results suggest a study of both the person and the environment may offer a more complete view than a focus on the individual alone. We concur with Cook (1985) in saying that an analysis of person-environment contingencies and interactions should perhaps replace a focus on the role of personality variables or traits alone.

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