

2012

Associations between the peer group and sex-role orientations among college-age men

Daniel L. King
Wabash College

Preston R. Bost
Wabash College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

King, Daniel L. and Bost, Preston R. (2012) "Associations between the peer group and sex-role orientations among college-age men," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 17 : No. 2 , Article 12. Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol17/iss2/12>

This articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals, Magazines, and Newsletters at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Psychological Studies by an authorized editor of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

Associations Between the Peer Group and Sex-Role Orientations Among College-Age Men

Daniel L. King
Wabash College

Preston R. Bost, PhD.
Wabash College

Daniel King
990 Semmes St.
Memphis, TN 38111
daniel.king2006@gmail.com
901-517-6768

Preston Bost
Wabash College
Crawfordsville, IN 47933
bostp@wabash.edu
765-361-6248

Abstract

Because research has identified that sex role orientation is flexible in response to environmental factors such as the peer group, the current study attempted to investigate whether sex-role orientation varies as a function of the peer group, operationalized by the type of institution (single-sex vs. co-educational) one attends. Using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) as a measure of sex-role endorsement, researchers sampled male participants attending a small, single-sex, Mid-western liberal arts institution and male participants from a small, co-educational, Mid-western liberal arts institution. Sex-role orientations were differently distributed at the two institutions. Specifically, more masculine individuals were observed at the single-sex institution and more feminine individuals were observed at the co-educational institution. Implications and suggestions for future research will be discussed.

Keywords: peer group, college, men, sex-role, orientation

Introduction

According to Bussey and Bandura (1999), sex role orientation permeates people's lives in fundamental ways, such as the talents they cultivate, the friends they choose, and the occupations they pursue. The literature on sex-role orientation has demonstrated that the different sex-roles (masculinity, femininity, and androgyny) function as different predictors of psychological health, such as masculinity being associated with self-esteem and psychological adaptiveness, femininity being associated with nurturance, and androgyny (equally high endorsements of masculinity and femininity) being associated with behavioral adaptability across situations. (Taylor & Hall, 1982; Marsh & Byrne, 1991; Bem, 1975). With sex role orientation being an important predictor of different life outcomes, it is important to understand the processes by which individuals identify with a particular sex role.

Some researchers have suggested that there are social and cultural influences that shape how individuals adopt masculine and feminine attitudes and characteristics (Eagly, 2009; Bem, 1979). In particular, Bem (1979) conceptualized masculinity and femininity as normally-distributed characteristics, with the expression of an individual's traits being influenced not only by cultural expectations but by the person's

immediate environment, including peers and situational context. Modern researchers such as Eagly (2009) have replaced "masculine" and "feminine" with the terms "agentic" and "communal" to avoid the implication of categorical differences between the sexes, but have retained an emphasis on socio-cultural influences. (Because this study relies heavily on Bem's [1979] original conceptualization and methodology, we have retained her original terminology for the purposes of clarity.)

The prospect of peer influences is particularly relevant to educational populations, who often attend (or inhabit) institutions designed with a particular mix of the sexes. Significant numbers of students, for example, attend single-sex institutions, which are alleged to have a number of benefits (Weil, 2008). How does attending a single-sex institution influence the development of sex roles? There is conflicting evidence in the extant literature on this issue. Lamb, Easterbrooks, and Holden (1980) found that the peer group administers punishments and reinforcements to one another in accordance with the definitions of conventional sex stereotypes. These researchers found that most punishments and reinforcements come from same-sex peers; that is, males tended to reinforce masculine behaviors and punish feminine behaviors for other males, and females tended to reinforce feminine behaviors and punish masculine behaviors for other

females. On the other hand, Serbin, Connor, Burchardt, & Citron (1979) provide different data about the effects of the peer group on sex-typing behavior. These researchers found that the presence of the *opposite sex* is influential for reinforcing sex-typed behavior. It should be noted that both the Lamb et al. (1980) and Serbin et al. (1979) studies were done with children, and it remains unclear how the peer group affects sex-role orientation in college populations. As well, the literature does not indicate whether any aspect of peer influence is particular to men, the population of interest for the current study.

Although both masculine and feminine traits are associated with a variety of markers of psychological health (Taylor & Hall, 1982; Whitley 1983; Marsh & Byrne, 1991), some research suggests that the most positive sex-role outcome might be androgyny, which is defined as endorsing masculine and feminine traits in high degrees. The androgynous individual is aware of cultural expectations for gender, but he/she can choose to defy the expectations. If the sex-typed (masculine or feminine) individual is highly attuned to these cultural expectations, then the androgynous individual is less attuned to these cultural expectations. Bem (1975) argued that androgynous individuals are less concerned about displaying "sex-inappropriate" behavior. Additionally, androgynous individuals also demonstrate some adaptive behavior, such as independence in the face of conformity (Bem, 1975). One goal of this study, therefore, is to measure relative rates of androgyny among men at single-sex and mixed sex institutions.

The primary focus of this study was to test whether sex-role orientation (masculinity, femininity, or androgyny) varied as a function of type of institution (single-sex vs. co-educational). According to the Lamb et al. (1980) study, individuals attending a single sex school should endorse more sex-typed attitudes and behaviors than individuals attending co-educational institutions because it is same-sex peers that encourage sex-appropriate behavior. That is, male students attending an all-male institution should demonstrate higher rating of masculinity than male students attending coeducational institutions. On the other hand, the Serbin et al. (1979) study suggests that male students attending a co-educational school should report higher ratings of masculinity because it is the presence of the opposite sex that inhibits sex-inappropriate behavior. Because individuals can choose the environments in which they learn, it seems prevalent to study which academic environments promote psychological health through sex role orientation.

Method

Participants

The sample was comprised of 101 undergraduates from a Mid-western single-sex institution and 103 undergraduates from a Mid-Western co-educational institution, consisting of 84 freshmen, 63 sophomores, 42 juniors, and 15 seniors. Most participants at the single-sex institution received credit in an introductory psychology course for their participation; the remainder of participants at this institution, and all of the participants at the coeducational institution, were compensated with gift certificates to a local restaurant.

Materials

Sex role identification was measured via the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1979). The BSRI is a 60-item questionnaire on which participants rate themselves on a variety of characteristics using a 1 ("Never or Almost Never") to 7 ("Always or Almost Always") Likert scale. The BSRI consists of two subscales: masculinity and femininity. Sample items on the masculine scale include "assertive, independent, and defend my own beliefs," and sample items on the feminine scale include "affectionate, sympathetic, and understanding." Based on the combination of subscale scores, individuals are classified as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or undifferentiated.

Procedure

After completing a consent form, participants were instructed to read the BSRI instructions and complete the inventory fully. Afterward, participants recorded their class year and were discharged with the thanks of the experimenter. The procedure took approximately 15 minutes.

Results

BSRI classification was obtained by computing medians of all participants mean masculinity and femininity scores, collapsing across institutions. Each participant's mean masculinity and femininity scores were then placed in relation to these medians (masculinity: 4.85; femininity: 4.40). Participants scoring above the median on both the masculine and feminine scales were classified as androgynous; participants scoring above the median on the masculine scale, but below the median on the feminine scale were classified as masculine; those scoring above the median on the feminine scale, but below the median on the

masculine scale were classified as feminine; and those scoring below the median on both the masculine and feminine scale were classified as undifferentiated.

Table 1 shows how participants were classified at each institution.

A chi-square for independence showed that the sex role classifications were not identical at the two institutions, $\chi^2(3) = 9.76, p < .05, r^2 = .047$. Specifically, more masculine individuals were found at the single sex institution, and more feminine individuals were found at the co-educational institution. There was no difference among androgynous and undifferentiated individuals between the two institutions.

Although BSRI data are typically evaluated by classifying individuals according to their simultaneous subscale scores, thus permitting a direct measure of the four sex role types, it is also possible to obtain a finer-grained look at masculinity and femininity in the two samples by observing how scores on these scales differ at the two institutions.

Mean masculinity and femininity scores for each institution are reported in Table 2.

A 2 (masculinity vs. femininity) x 2 (single-sex vs. co-educational) mixed-model ANOVA showed that across institutions, masculinity scores were higher than femininity scores, $F(1,196) = 43.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .183$. There was an interaction between scale type (masculinity vs. femininity) and institution (single sex vs. coeducational), $F(1,196) = 11.52, p < .01, \eta^2 = .056$; that is, men who attended the single sex institution scored higher on the masculinity scale than men who attended the coeducational, while men attending the coeducational institution scored higher on the femininity scale than men at the single sex institution. However, there was not a main effect of institution, $F(1,196) = 1.095, p > .05$.

Because there were higher rates of masculinity (number of individuals and masculinity-scale scores) at the single sex institution, a 2 ((masculinity vs. femininity) x 4 (class year) mixed-model ANOVA was used to investigate whether this was due to self-selection or environmental influence.

Table 3 shows the mean masculinity and femininity ratings across class year at the single-sex institution.

There were no differences in sex role identification over class year, $F(3,94) = 2.40, p > .05$. As well, there was no interaction between scale type and class year, $F(3,94) = 1.72, p > .05$. However, a main effect of scale type was found, which was consistent

with the 2 (masculinity vs. femininity) x 2 (single-sex vs. co-educational) ANOVA reported above, $F(1,94) = 43.92, p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test whether sex-role orientation is responsive to environmental factors, such as the peer group. The extant literature has not indicated which peer group promotes which sex-role. Although the current study does not find evidence for an association of androgyny and type of institution, this study does present evidence for two interesting findings. First, according to the Bem scoring method, there was not an even distribution among the four sex-role categories at the two institutions; students at the single-sex institution more often fell into the masculine category. Secondly, males attending the single-sex institution had reliably higher scores on the masculinity subscale.

The differences between these two types of institution could be explained in two ways. First, it could be that the environment, or the peer group, shapes the individual's sex-role orientations over time. The second explanation could be that masculine males are self-selecting an all-male school. If the peer group is shaping sex-role orientations, then masculinity ratings should increase across class year. However, after conducting the analysis by class, it was observed that ratings of masculinity do not increase over time for students attending the single-sex institution. Our data seems to suggest that masculine individuals are choosing to apply to the all-male institution. Although our data might suggest self-selection, these results have limitations. In particular, there was a small sample of seniors in this study, and there is a concern that this sample may be non-representative. Thus, to ascertain whether the peer group has an effect on sex role identification, further research is needed. For future researchers, one suggestion is to enlarge the sample of seniors. Then, it can be clarified if a pre-selection bias or if masculinity scores are being facilitated over time.

At minimum, the data indicate that men in the single-sex sample were more masculine than men in the coeducational sample. What are the psychological implications? As suggested above, some parts of the literature on masculinity suggest that higher masculine scores on the BSRI are associated with positive psychological health, such as self-esteem and psychological adaptiveness (Taylor & Hall, 1982; Whitley 1983; Jones, Chernovetz, Hansson, 1978). In the literature, self-esteem has some positive correlates. For instance, self-esteem has been found to be modestly and positively correlated with academic performance

(Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). As well, individuals with higher levels of self-esteem tend to persist longer at tasks, even in the face of failure (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). Finally, self-esteem leads to higher levels of happiness. Those with high self-esteem are less likely to report being depressed (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). As well, higher masculinity ratings predict adaptability across attitudinal, personality, and behavioral dimensions (Jones, Chernovetz, & Hansson, 1978). These dimensions include but are not limited to locus of control, neurosis, problems with alcohol, political awareness, introversion-extroversion, and self-efficacy beliefs.

Conversely, other parts of the literature on masculinity suggest that rigid adherence to the male gender role may put individuals at risk for a host of negative psychological consequences. Male gender role conflict is the psychological distress created by overly rigid adherence to traditional male norms (Addis, 2008; Lane & Addis, 2005; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). In particular, males who adhere rigidly to traditional norms seem to hold negative attitudes toward seeking psychological help. This is problematic because men, just like women, sometimes need to seek help when they experience psychological distress. For instance, men who are depressed may choose not to seek help,

but they may present their depression in forms of substance abuse, alcohol abuse, or aggression towards their family (Addis, 2008).

With this evidence at hand, campus administrators may be enlightened about some of the issues that highly masculine student bodies might face. Based on the empirical evidence in the literature, masculinity is like a double edged sword. There are both positive and negative aspects associated with it. However, both aspects can inform campus administrators how to interact with students, shape student-life programming, create intervention methods, and encourage masculine men to seek help when they are in trouble.

In conclusion, the present study suggests that colleges for men can expect to have higher rates of masculinity. As with any research study, our project raises as many questions as it attempts to answer. Further research will help us understand if the environment at all male institution facilitates masculinity, and it would help us understand the implications of having a masculine student body. For future directions, as stated above, researchers could replicate the present study with a larger sample of seniors and investigate whether a similar pattern of sex-role orientation holds at colleges for women.

References

- Addis, M. E. (2008). Gender and depression in men. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*.
- Addis, M., & Mahalik, J. (2003). Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking. *American Psychologist*, 58 (1), 5-14.
- Baumeister, R., Campbell, J., Krueger, J., & Vohs, K. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1), 1-44.
- Bussey, K. & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological Review*, 106, 676-713.
- Bem, S.L. (1975). Sex role adaptability: One consequence of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 31, 634-643.
- Bem, S. L. (1977). On the utility of alternative procedures for assessing psychological androgyny. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 45, 196-205
- Bem, S. L. (1979). Theory and measurement of androgyny: A reply to the Pedhazur- Tetenbaum and Locksley-Colten critiques. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1047-1054.
- Eagly, A. (2009). The his and her of prosocial behavior: An examination of the social psychology of gender. *American Psychologist*, 64, 644-658.
- Jones, W. H., Chernovetz, M. E., & Hansson, R. O. (1978). The enigma of androgyny: Differential implications for males and females? *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 46, 298-313
- Lamb, M., Easterbrooks, M., & Holden, G. (1980). Reinforcement and punishment among preschoolers: Characteristics, effects, and correlates. *Child Development*, 51, 1230-1236.
- Lane, J., & Addis, M. (2005). Male gender role conflict and patterns of help seeking in Costa Rica and the United States. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 6(3), 155-168.
- Marsh, H. W. & Byrne, B. M. (1991). Differentiated additive androgyny model: Relations between masculinity, femininity, and multiple dimensions of self-concept. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 811-828.
- O'Connor, K., Mann, D. W., & Bardwick, J. M. (1978). Androgyny and self-esteem in the upper middle class: A replication of Spence. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 46, 1168-1169.
- Serbin, L.A., Connor, J.M., Burchardt, C.J., & Citron, C.C. (1979). Effects of peer presence on sex-typing of children's play behavior. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 27, 303-309.
- Spence, J. T., Helmreich, R., Strapp, J. (1975) Ratings of self and peers on sex role attributes and their relation to self-esteem and conceptions of masculinity and femininity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32, 29-39.

Taylor, M. C. & Hall, J. A. (1982). Psychological androgyny: Theories, methods, and conclusions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 92, 347-366.

Weil, E. (2008, March 2). Teaching boys and girls separately [Electronic Version]. *The New York Times*.

Whitley, B. E. (1983). Sex role orientation and self-esteem: A critical meta-analytic review. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 765-778.

Worell, J. (1978). Sex roles and psychological well-being: Perspectives on methodology. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 46, 777-791.

Table 1
Frequency of BSRI Classifications for Two Institutions

Institution	Masculinity	Femininity	Androgyny	Undifferentiated
Single-Sex	35	19	24	20
Co-Educational	18	33	24	25
Total	53	52	48	45

Table 2
Mean Masculinity and Femininity Ratings for the Two Institutions

Institution	Sex Role	
	Masculinity	Femininity
Single-Sex	4.97	4.35
Co-educational	4.70	4.50
Marginal Means	4.84	4.43

Table 3
Mean BSRI Masculinity and Femininity Ratings Across Class Year for the All-Male Sample

Scale Type	Class Year			
	Fresh.	Soph.	Junior	Senior
Masculinity	4.85	4.99	4.96	5.54
Femininity	4.43	4.45	4.16	4.40