

Gender-Role Identity and Self-Esteem

Pamela Frome & Jacquelynne Eccles
University of Michigan

Poster presented at the biannual meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, March 7, 1996, Boston, MA. This research has been funded by grants from NIMH, NSF, and NICHD to Jacquelynne Eccles and by grants from NSF, the Spencer Foundation and the W. T. Grant Foundation to Jacquelynne Eccles and Bonnie Barber. The authors would like to thank the following people for their assistance over the years: Bonnie Barber, Andrew Fuligni, Debbie Jozefowicz, Lisa Colarossi, Kathy Houser, and Amy Arbretton. Inquiries can be addressed to the first author at 5201 Institute for Social Research, P.O. Box 1248, 426 Thompson St., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Please do not cite without permission.

ABSTRACT

James (1890) hypothesized that individuals base their self-esteem on performance only in domains of importance to them. This theory would predict that the relationship between one's gender-role identity and one's self-esteem should be dependent on the importance one places on masculinity and femininity. In addition, it is predicted that the self-perception that one is not conforming to societal gender-role norms will result in lowered self-esteem (sex-role strain). In this study we examine the relation between gender-role identity and self-esteem, and the relation between the interaction of gender-role identity and the value of masculinity and femininity on self-esteem.

Results show a small, but significant, main effect of gender-role identity on self-esteem. Perceiving oneself as feminine was positively related to self-esteem for females and perceiving oneself as masculine was positively related to self-esteem for males. There was also a small, but significant, interaction effect such that for cross-typed females valuing the cross-typed gender role and devaluing the traditionally gender-congruent role was associated with higher self-esteem. This results was not found, however, for cross-typed males. For gender-congruent-typed males, devaluing the cross-typed role and valuing the gender-congruent role was associated with higher self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

Research has found that gender-role identity (for this paper defined as the degree to which one perceives oneself as being masculine or feminine; McNeill & Petersen, 1985) is linked to self-esteem (Baruch & Barnett, 1975; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Kleinplatz, McCarrey & Kateb, 1992),

although the results have not been consistent as to how these two constructs are linked. At first it was theorized that women who are high in femininity should have the highest self-esteem (congruence model; Whitely, 1983); it was later hypothesized that androgynous women or women high in masculinity should have the highest self-esteem (androgyny and masculinity models; Bem, 1974; Lamke, 1982; Massad, 1981; Spence, 1983; Whitley, 1983).

However, the scales that have traditionally been used in gender-role identity research (Personality Attributes Questionnaire, Spence & Helmreich, 1978; Bem Sex Role Inventory, Bem, 1974) only assess the traits of instrumentality and expressiveness and do not necessarily measure all the domains that are covered under the terms "femininity" and "masculinity" (Deaux, 1984; Deaux & Lewis, 1984). (Femininity and masculinity are defined here as socially-defined sex appropriate traits, attitudes, interests, appearance, and behaviors; Pleck, 1982). These scales use only the domain of personality traits to define femininity and masculinity and do not include other possible aspects of gender-role identity such as physical appearance, role behaviors, and occupations (Deaux, 1984; Deaux & Lewis, 1984; Spence, 1983; Whitley, 1983).

In addition, these studies do not account for individual within-gender differences in the relation between gender-role values and self-esteem (see Bem, 1981 and Markus, Crane, Bernstein & Siladi, 1982 for a discussion of individual differences regarding self-schemas and gender). According to James (1890), individuals base their self-esteem on their performance only in domains of importance. Support for this theory has been found by Harter (1993) in the domains of school, athletics, social ability, behavioral conduct, and physical appearance. Thus, in the domain of gender roles, one's gender-role identity should influence self-esteem only to the degree that this identity is valued by the individual.

However, other researchers have proposed that since the norms of one's group (for example societal prescriptives that females should be feminine and males should be masculine) become internalized by the individual, group values will be influential in determining an individual's ratings of the importance of a domain (Coopersmith, 1967). Failing to meet expectations in a domain deemed important by society could lead to negative psychological consequences. For example, the negative effects (specifically low self-esteem) of not conforming to larger societal sex role norms has been referred to as sex role strain (Eccles & Bryan, 1994; Garnets & Pleck, 1979). Pelham (1995) posits that it appears that while group norms are important in the relation between self-views and self-esteem, individual differences in ratings of importance of domains also influence this relation. Thus, while group norms should impact the influence of gender-role identity on self-esteem, individual differences in the amount of importance placed on fulfilling the gender role norms should also influence self-esteem.

Since masculinity and femininity are by definition one prescribed gender-role identity for the respective genders, we predict that for females, self-perceptions of femininity will be positively correlated with self-esteem and that for males, self-perceptions of masculinity will be positively correlated with self-esteem. In addition, we predict that an interaction will occur such that the more importance the individual places on their own gender-role identity and the less importance they place on the gender-role identity with which they do not identify, the higher their self-esteem will be.

METHODS

The data for this research are part of a longitudinal investigation, the Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions (P.I.s Jacquelynne Eccles and Bonnie Barber). The data reported here were collected during the participants' sophomore

year in high school. Approximately 685 females and 530 males were included in these analyses. The students in this study are primarily European-American and come from low- to middle-income communities.

The gender role identity scale was made up of three items, "I feel as though I am if...", "I appear as though I am..." and "Other people see me as...", that were answered on a 7-point Likert scale anchored at the low end (1) with "very masculine" and at the high end (7) with "very feminine" ($\alpha=.97$, this is a modified version of the Sexual Identity Scale; Stern, Barak, & Gould, 1987). The value of masculinity was measured by the question, "How important it is to you to engage in activities that make you appear masculine?", answered on a 7-point Likert scale anchored at the low end (1) with "not at all important" and the high end (7) with "very important". The value of femininity was measured by the question, "How important it is to you to engage in activities that make you appear feminine?", answered on a 7-point Likert scale anchored at the low end (1) with "not at all important" and the high end (7) with "very important".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Due to the fact that there is a societal norm/value for females to be feminine and for males to be masculine, it was hypothesized that a feminine gender-role identity would have a positive relation to self-esteem for females and that a masculine gender-role identity would have a positive relation to self-esteem for males. This hypothesis was supported: for females, there was a significant positive correlation between gender role identity and self-esteem ($r=.22$, $p < .001$), and for males, there was a significant negative correlation between the measure of gender-role identity and self-esteem ($r=-.20$, $p < .001$ (since a more masculine gender-role identity is coded at the low end of the scale the negative correlation represents a positive relationship).

Separate hierarchical regression analyses for females and males showed that gender-role identity on average explained 5% of the variance in self-esteem. There was a positive main effect of gender-role identity on self-esteem such that females with more feminine gender-role identities had higher self-esteem, while males with more masculine gender-role identities had higher self-esteem (see Table 1). These findings support the idea that there is a general societal value placed on females being feminine and males being masculine such that masculinity/femininity predict somewhat to self-esteem, although they explain only a small amount of the variance. These findings also support the congruence hypothesis, which posits that individuals with a gender-congruent identity will have higher self-esteem than those with a cross-typed identity. There was an unpredicted main effect of the value of masculinity for males, such that, when controlling for gender-role identity, placing a high value on masculinity predicted self-esteem (see Table 1).

The interaction between gender-role identity and the value of masculinity and femininity was significant (except for value of masculinity for boys), explaining an additional 1% to 2% of the variance in self-esteem (see Table 1). For females, the interaction hypothesis was partially supported. Masculine-typed females who valued masculinity and those who devalued femininity had higher self-esteem than those who devalued masculinity and valued femininity (see Figures 1 & 2). However, the predicted interaction for feminine-typed females was not found. There were no self-esteem differences among feminine-typed females based on their value of masculinity and femininity.

The interaction hypothesis was also partially supported for males. Masculine-typed males who valued masculinity and those who devalued femininity had higher self-esteem than those who devalued masculinity and valued femininity (see Figures 3 & 4). However, the interaction hypothesis was not supported for feminine-typed males. For feminine-typed males, the value of femininity did not

influence self-esteem, and contrary to predictions, those adolescents who valued masculinity had higher self-esteem than those who devalued masculinity.

Thus, an interesting between-gender effect emerged; for cross-typed females valuing the cross-typed gender role was associated with increased self-esteem, but not for cross-typed males. In addition, for gender congruent-typed males, devaluing the cross-typed role was associated with increased self-esteem, but not for gender congruent-typed females. It appears that the pressure for males to avoid the feminine gender-role is so extreme that for feminine-identified males valuing femininity (and devaluing masculinity) is not associated with higher self-esteem. This effect could be due to an overall societal valuing of masculinity and devaluing of femininity (especially for males), such that even though some feminine-identified males valued femininity they may have perceived that others do not value femininity and so their own value of femininity was not a strong enough factor to allow their self-perception of femininity to contribute to their self-esteem. Whereas, it seems that the pressure for girls to avoid masculinity exists (reflected by the results that feminine-identified females have higher self-esteem than masculine-identified females), but is somewhat less extreme than the pressure for males to avoid femininity since masculine-identified females who value masculinity have higher self-esteem than those who do not.

Future research should explore the meaning of the words "masculine" and "feminine" for adolescents. It has been proposed that gender-role identity is a multidimensional construct (for example, in an adult samples femininity has been found to include: expressive characteristics, social roles, emotional dependency, and independence; in an adult sample, masculinity has been found to include: instrumental qualities, social roles, and job performance; Spence & Sawin, 1985). Thus, it is difficult to know exactly what the adolescent participants in the current study have in mind when rating themselves on gender-role identity. Perhaps the

relationship between gender-role identity and self-esteem would be better understood treating gender-role identity as a multidimensional construct, specifically naming the dimensions of which it is composed.

References

- Baruch, G. & Barnett, R. (1975). Implications and applications of recent research on feminine development. Psychiatry, 38, 318-327.
- Bem, S. L. (1974). The measurement of psychological androgyny. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 42, 155-162.
- Bem, S.L. (1981). Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. Psychological Review, 88, 354-364.
- Broverman, I., Vogel, S., Broverman, D., Clarkson, F., & Rosenkrantz, P. (1972). Sex-role stereotypes: A current appraisal. Journal of Social Issues, 10, 399-407.
- Coopersmith, S. (1967). The antecedents of self-esteem. San Francisco, CA: W.H. Freeman & Co.
- Deaux, K. (1984). From individual differences to social categories. American Psychologist, 39, 105-116.
- Deaux, K. & Lewis, L. (1984). Structure of gender-stereotypes: Interrelationships among components and gender label. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46, 991-1004.
- Eccles, J. & Bryan, J. (1994). Adolescence: Critical crossroad in the path of gender-role development. In M. R. Stevenson (Ed.), Gender Roles Through the Life Span. Muncie, Indiana: Ball State University.
- Garnets, L. & Pleck, J. (1979). Sex role identity, androgyny, and sex role transcendence: A sex role strain analysis. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 3, 270-283.

Harter, S. (1993). Causes and consequences of self-esteem in children and adolescents. In R.F. Baumeister (Ed.), Self-Esteem: the puzzle of low self-regard. New York: Plenum.

James, W. (1890). The principles of psychology. New York: Holt.

Kleinplatz, P., McCarrey, M., & Kateb, C. (1992). The impact of gender-role identity on women's self-esteem, lifestyle satisfaction and conflict. Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, 24, 333-347.

Lamke, L. (1982). The impact of sex-role orientation on self-esteem in early adolescence. Child Development, 53, 1530-1535.

Markus, H., Crane, M., Bernstein, S. & Siladi, M. (1982). Self-schemas and gender. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42, 38-50.

Massad, C. (1981). Sex role identity and adjustment during adolescence. Child Development, 52, 1290-1298.

McNeill, S. & Petersen, A. (1985). Gender role identity in early adolescence: Reconsideration of theory. Academic Psychology Bulletin, 7, 229-315.

Pelham, B. W. (1995). Self-investment and self-esteem: Evidence for a Jamesian model of self-worth. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 69, 1141-1150.

Pleck, J. H. (1982). The myth of masculinity. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Spence, J.T. (1983). Comment on Lubinski, Tellegen, and Butcher's "Masculinity, Femininity, and Androgyny Viewed and Assessed as Distinct Concepts". Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44, 440-446.

Spence, J. T. & Helmreich, R. L. (1978). Masculinity and femininity: Their psychological dimensions, correlates, and antecedents. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Spence, J. T. & Sawin, L. L. (1985). Images of masculinity and femininity: A reconceptualization. In V. O'Leary, R. Unger, B. Wallston (Eds.) Women, gender, and social psychology. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Stern, B., Barak, B., & Gould, S. (1987). Sexual Identity Scale: A New Self-Assessment Measure. Sex Roles, 17, 503-519.

Whitley, B., Jr. (1983). Sex Role Orientation and Self-Esteem: A Critical Meta-Analytic Review. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44, 765-778.

Table 1. Influence of Gender-Role Identity and Value of Gender-Role on Self-Esteem

Females		B	R Square Change
Step 1	gender-role identity	.31***	
	value of masculinity	.04	.05***
Step 2	interaction	-.07**	.01***
Total R Square			.06***
Step 1	gender-role identity	.33***	
	value of femininity	-.05	.05***
	interaction	.06*	.01*
Total R Square			.06***
Males		B	R Square Change
Step 1	gender-role identity	-.19***	
	value of masculinity	.09**	.05***
Step 2	interaction	.01	.00
Total R Square			.05***
Step 1	gender-role identity	-.25***	
	value of femininity	-.06	.04***
Step 2	interaction	.10***	.02***
Total R Square			.06***

Figure 1. Females-Importance of Femininity

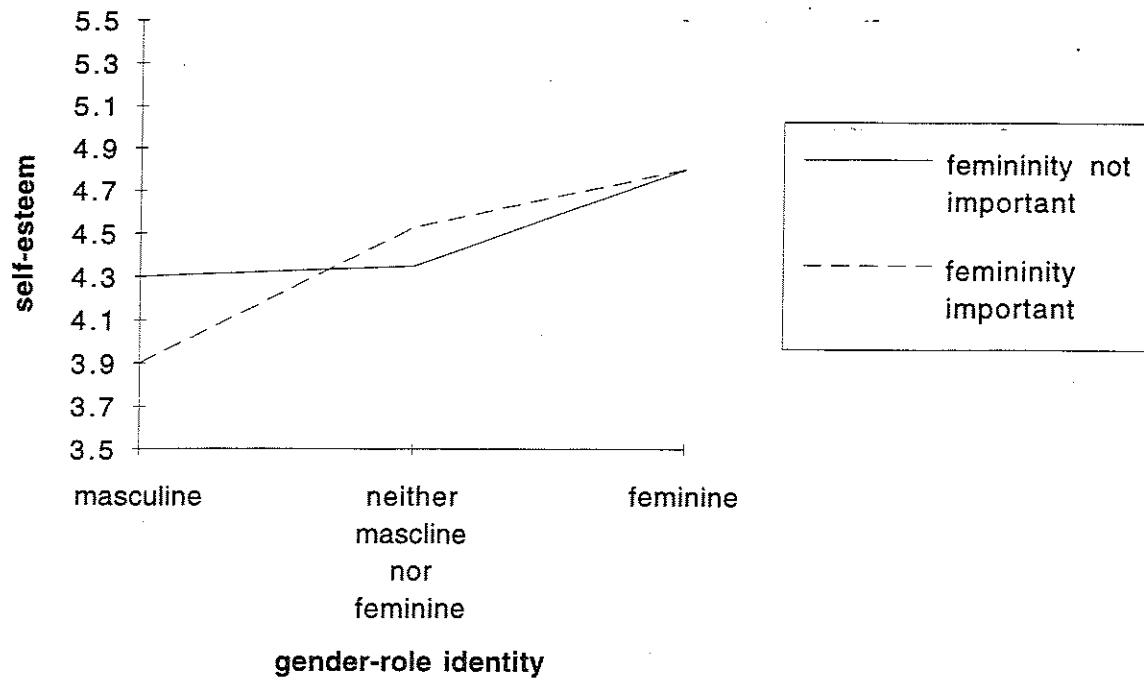


Figure 2. Females- Importance of Masculinity

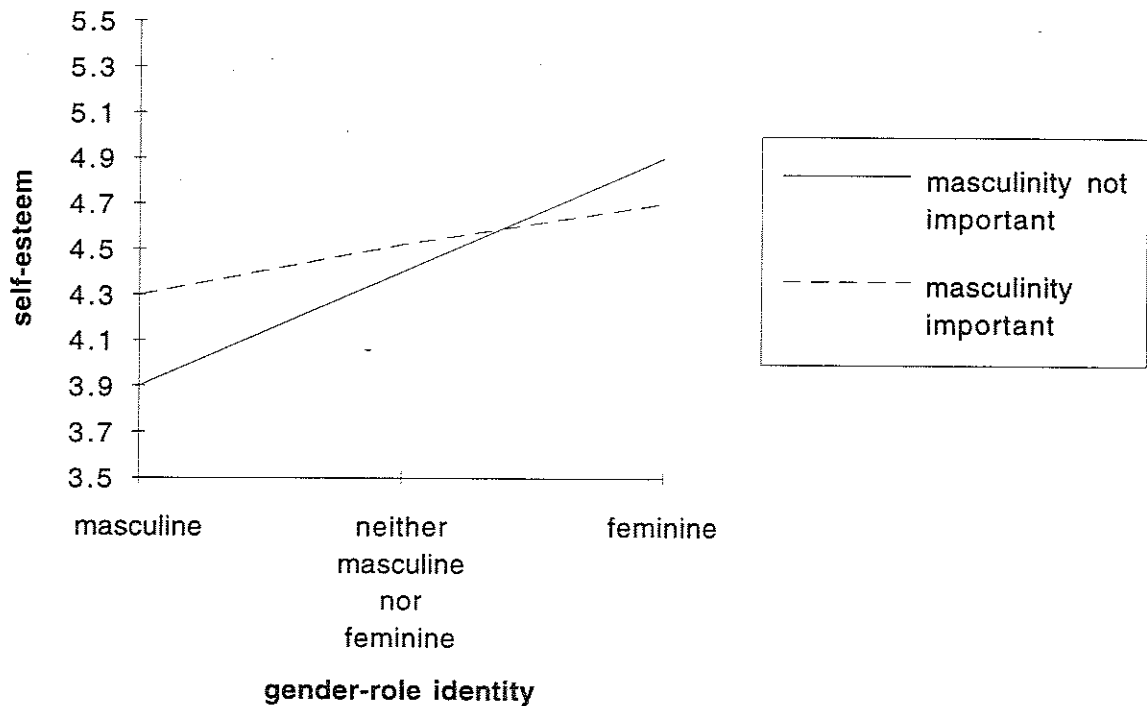


Figure 3. Males-Importance of Femininity

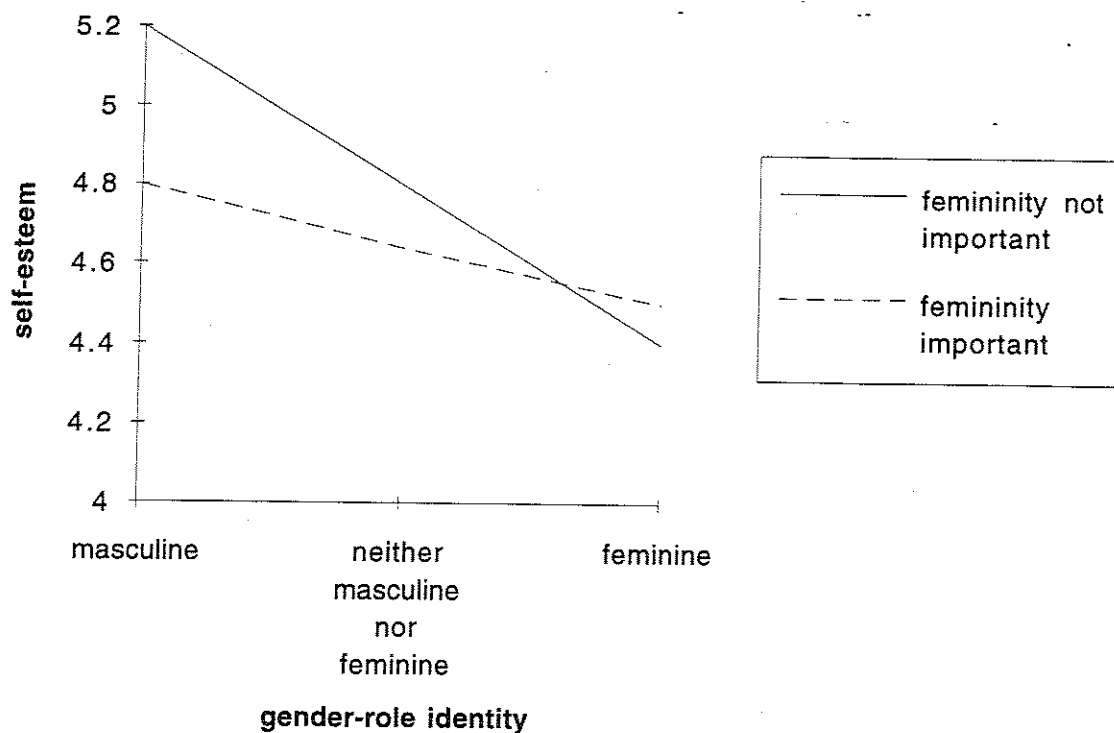


Figure 4. Males- Importance of Masculinity

