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Gender Role Identity and Attitudes Toward Feminism

By: Paige W. Toller, Elizabeth A. Suter, and Todd C. Trautman

Abstract

In this study we examined relationships among gender role identity, support for feminism, nontraditional gender roles, and willingness to consider oneself a feminist in a sample of college students (N = 301). For female participants, we found positive relationships among higher masculinity on the PAQ (Personal Attributes Questionnaire), nontraditional attitudes toward gender roles, and the combined SRAI (Sex Role Attitudinal Inventory). A negative correlation was also found between lower scores on the PAQ masculinity–femininity index and the combined SRAI in women. For male participants, we found positive relationships among high femininity on the SIS (Sexual Identity Scale), willingness to consider oneself a feminist, positive attitudes toward the women’s movement, and the combined SRAI. We also found a negative relationship between high masculinity on the PAQ and willingness to consider oneself a feminist in men. The implications of these findings for the feminist movement are discussed.

Keywords: gender, sex, identity, role, feminism, gender roles

Many feminist theorists believe gender is not innate; rather gender is something we do (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and perform (Butler, 1990). Biological sex constrains gender performance, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) noted “Gendered performances are available to everyone, but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity. And this is where gender and sex come together, as society tries to match up ways of behaving with biological sex assignments” (p. 10). As such, highly masculine men and highly feminine women perform their gender role identity based on traditional notions of what constitutes masculinity and femininity. In the United States, a successful man’s performance of high masculinity requires that the man be tough, in control, and aggressive, sometimes even violent (Kimmel, 2000). At the other extreme, a successful woman’s performance of high femininity requires that the woman be nurturing, physically attractive, and passive (Wood, 1993).

Support for and opposition to feminism might be partially explained by gender role identity. Research has shown that feminists are frequently construed as unfeminine (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Caplan, 1985; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994) and as possessing masculine traits such as aggressiveness (Rubin, 1994). It seems reasonable to predict that highly feminine women might be hesitant to consider themselves feminists because such characteristics are inconsistent with their gender role identity. Although there is less research on why men might be hesitant to consider themselves feminists, research has shown that the label “feminist” remains coded as female (Williams & Wittig, 1997). As a result, highly masculine men may also find the label “feminist” inconsistent with their gender role identity.

Research to date contains several shortcomings that limit the strength of the conclusion that gender role identity is related to attitudes toward feminism. The objective of the present study was to determine whether or not there are relationships among gender role identity, support for feminism, and willingness

to consider oneself a feminist. It is our central hypothesis that more masculine men and more feminine women will have less positive attitudes toward feminism.

There is limited empirical evidence available concerning the relationships among gender role identity, support for feminism, and willingness to consider oneself a feminist. In an early study Mezydlo and Betz (1980) compared feminist and nonfeminist perceptions of ideal men and women. Both feminist and nonfeminist men and women described an ideal man as highly masculine. However, feminists described an ideal woman as possessing masculine characteristics.

Several existing research reports provide the warrant for the current study. Scholars reported that highly masculine men are less likely than more feminine men to support feminism (Jackson, Fleury, & Lewandowski, 1996; Twenge, 1999). These findings suggest the following hypothesis for men:

Hypothesis 1: In men, increased masculinity will be associated with negative attitudes toward (a) feminism, (b) negative attitudes toward nontraditional gender roles, and (c) willingness to consider oneself a feminist.

On the other hand, women's support for feminism has not been found to be related to femininity (Jackson et al., 1996; Twenge, 1999). Questions remain concerning the relationship between femininity and support for feminism among women. Why have two previous studies demonstrated a null relationship between feminism and femininity among women? This seems surprising given the results of Burn, Aboud, and Moyles (2000), who measured gender self-esteem, "that part of an individual's selfconcept derived from being male or female" (p. 1083). Burn et al. found that high gender self-esteem in women and low gender self-esteem in men were positively related to support for feminism. However, their measures concerned gender social identity (group), rather than gender role identity (individual). In the present study we tested whether a similar relationship might exist between gender role identity and support for feminism for women:

Hypothesis 2: In women, increased femininity will be associated with negative attitudes toward (a) feminism, (b) negative attitudes toward nontraditional gender roles, and (c) willingness to consider oneself a feminist.

Method

Participants

Three hundred and one undergraduate students participated in the present study. Recruitment of participants occurred in a variety of communication courses at a midwestern university. The actual sample sizes in the specific analyses varied due in part to item nonresponse. Participants included 118 (40.3%) male and 175 (59.7%) female students. The respondents' colleges included Arts and Sciences (55.6%), Business Administration (17.5%), Journalism and Mass Communication (10.8%), and Engineering and Technology (4.4%). The remaining 8.1% were in Teacher's College, Agricultural Science, Fine and Performing Arts, Architecture, Human Resource and Family Science, and Law. Nearly 97% of respondents were between the ages of 19 and 22 (63.3%) and between 23 and 32 (33.3%). The remaining 3.3% of participants were older than 32 years. Two hundred and fifty-seven (86.5%) participants reported that their mothers worked outside the home at some point when they were growing up. Of those 257 respondents, 132 (48.7%) of the students were between the ages of 0 and 4 years when their mother began working outside the home.

The majority of the participants were reared as either Catholic (35.5%) or Lutheran (17.1%). Other categories included: Methodist (10.6%), Nondenominational (11.3%), Presbyterian (7.5%), other

(11.6%), and none (6.5%). The participants were drawn from a university with a student population of 92.8% White, 2.8% Asian, 2.0% Native American, 2.0% Black, and 0.04% Hispanic (Institutional Research and Planning, 2003).

Measures

The Sex Role Attitudinal Inventory (SRAI; Renzetti, 1987) is a 24-item instrument that asks respondents to report their attitudes toward statements about feminism and gender roles. Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale, that ranged from 1 D strongly disagree to 5 D strongly agree. Low scores indicate non-feminist attitudes toward gender roles, a low level of awareness of gender inequality, and weak support for the women's movement. Following Renzetti (1987) we divided this instrument into four subscales: (a) traditional attitudes toward gender roles (nine statements); (b) feminist attitudes toward gender roles (five statements); (c) awareness of gender inequality (four statements); and (d) attitudes toward the women's movement (six statements). One of the six statements that measure attitudes toward the women's movement asked participants whether they agree with the statement "I consider myself to be a feminist." Responses to this question were analyzed separately as "willingness to consider oneself a feminist."

The reliability of each subscale was established using Cronbach's (1951) coefficient alpha. High reliability coefficients were present for the combined SRAI ($\alpha = .83$) and for two of the SRAI subscales: traditional attitudes toward gender roles ($\alpha = .78$) and attitudes toward the women's movement ($\alpha = .76$). The subscales of statements that indicate awareness of gender inequality ($\alpha = .37$) and feminist attitudes toward gender roles ($\alpha = .33$) had low coefficients of reliability. Calculating the coefficients of reliability for men and women separately did not explain the low reliability. The question about including women in the military draft appeared to be problematic given that during data collection the war in Iraq was in its initial stages. A low inter-item correlation ($.01$) signaled a second problematic question, which read "things are much easier for girls growing up today than they were for girls growing up 10 years ago." Given the low coefficients of reliability for the gender inequality and feminist attitudes toward gender roles subscales, we chose to only use the traditional attitudes toward gender roles and attitudes toward the women's movement subscales.

We used two separate measures of gender role identity. The *Personal Attributes Questionnaire* (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974) asks respondents to rate themselves on 24 bipolar adjective scales. Each adjective is rated on a 5-point scale, with the endpoints labeled with descriptive phrases that are opposites. The instrument consists of three subscales: masculinity ($\alpha = .75$), femininity ($\alpha = .79$), and masculinity–femininity ($\alpha = .65$), each of which was composed of the sum of eight items. Higher scores on the PAQ masculinity subscale reflect characteristics that are socially desirable in both sexes, but more common in men. Higher scores on the PAQ femininity subscale reflect characteristics that are socially desirable in both sexes, but more common in women. Higher scores on the PAQ masculinity–femininity subscale reflect traits more desirable in women and lower scores reflect traits more desirable in men.

The *Sexual Identity Scale* (SIS; Stern, Barak, & Gould, 1987) is a 4-item measure that asks respondents to rate themselves in terms of their interests and how they look, feel, and do things. Respondents rate themselves on a 5-point scale that ranges from 100 = *very masculine* to 500 = *very feminine*; the middle point of the continuum is *neither masculine nor feminine*. Individual items are scored from 100 = *very masculine* to 500 = *very feminine* (Beere, 1990). The scale met conventional levels of reliability ($\alpha = .87$).

Procedure

Data for this investigation were collected during the spring semester of 2003. Prior to data collection, we obtained instructors' permission to enter classrooms and distribute questionnaires. Each student was

provided questionnaire guidelines and informed consent forms that described the voluntary nature of the project. In some classes students received extra credit in exchange for participation. Each student who chose to participate completed the questionnaire during class time. The questionnaire took roughly 25-min to complete. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions and the following measures: (a) Sex Role Attitudinal Inventory (SRAI; Renzetti, 1987); (b) Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1974); and (c) Sexual Identity Scale (SIS; Stern, Barak, & Gould, 1987). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the instrument, which reversed the order of the PAQ and SIS scales. Table I presents descriptive statistics for these scales.

Results

Men Only

We tested our hypotheses using a series of Pearson Product-Moment correlations. Our first hypothesis predicted that in men, increased masculinity would be associated with negative attitudes toward feminism, negative attitudes toward nontraditional gender roles, and unwillingness to consider oneself a feminist. This hypothesis was partially supported when we measured gender role identity using both the SIS and the PAQ masculinity index. As seen in Table II, statistically significant positive correlations were found between higher SIS scores and willingness to consider oneself a feminist, $r = .25, p < .01$, higher SIS scores and attitudes toward the women's movement, $r = .20, p < .05$, and higher SIS scores and the SRAI combined, $r = .17, p < .05$. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between high scores on the PAQ masculinity index and willingness to consider oneself a feminist, $r = .21, p < .05$. Correlations between the PAQ femininity index and all four subscales of the SRAI were not statistically significant (see Table II). None of the correlations between the PAQ masculinity–femininity index and the four subscales of the SRAI were significant.

Women Only

Our second hypothesis predicted that in women, increased femininity would be associated with negative attitudes toward feminism, negative attitudes toward nontraditional gender roles, and unwillingness to consider oneself a feminist. This hypothesis was partially supported when we measured gender role identity with the PAQ masculinity index and the PAQ masculinity–femininity index. As seen in Table II, statistically significant positive correlations were found between higher PAQ masculinity scores and nontraditional attitudes toward gender roles, $r = .21, p < .01$, and higher PAQ masculinity scores and the combined SRAI, $r = .19, p < .01$. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between lower scores on the PAQ masculinity–femininity index and the combined SRAI, $r = .19, p < .05$.

The PAQ masculinity index was unrelated to support for the women's movement and willingness to consider oneself a feminist. No statistically significant relationships were found between the SRAI and the PAQ femininity index or between the SRAI and the SIS.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among gender role identity, support for feminism, and willingness to consider oneself a feminist. Our first set of findings concerns male participants. As expected we discovered that high SIS scores, which indicate high levels of femininity, were associated with positive attitudes toward the women's movement, willingness to consider oneself a feminist, and the combined SRAI. This finding clearly supports our first hypothesis. Findings based on the PAQ masculinity index paralleled the SIS findings in that highly masculine men were less likely to consider themselves feminists. It is clear that highly masculine men are hesitant to consider themselves

feminists. Several recent lines of work found similar patterns for men (Burn et al., 2000; Jackson et al., 1996; & Twenge, 1999).

Our findings might be explained by considering the performance of masculinity. Masculine men may perceive the label of “feminist” as contradictory to their performance of a masculine gender role identity. Twenge and Zucker (1999) found that students derided and questioned a hypothetical feminist man’s masculinity. Another possible explanation why men reject the feminist label is that the connotation of the label “feminist” remains coded as female (Williams & Wittig, 1997).

Our second set of findings concerns female participants. We found positive relationships between highly masculine women and positive attitudes toward nontraditional gender roles and between the combined SRAI. We also found a negative relationship between the PAQ masculinity–femininity index and the combined SRAI. Low scores on the PAQ masculinity–femininity index indicate traits more desirable in men. These findings support those of Burn et al. (2000) and contradict those of Jackson et al. (1996).

Possible explanations for these findings may be that women often describe feminists with masculine traits, such as “dominating” and “aggressive” (Rubin, 1994). Thus, the more feminine women in our study may have viewed feminism and nontraditional gender roles as masculine. Our results might also be explained by previous research that feminism is equated with being unfeminine (Alexander & Ryan, 1997; Caplan, 1985; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1994; Rubin, 1994).

Concern about question order effects led us to construct two versions of the instrument that varied the order of the SIS and the PAQ. Analysis revealed no statistical differences between respondents who answered the SIS prior to the PAQ and those who answered the SIS after the PAQ. This reduces concern that participants answering the SIS may simply have been asserting that their gender role identity is consistent with their attitudes toward feminism.

Our findings contribute to the previous literature on gender role identity and support for feminism. Although the magnitudes of the correlations may be lower than conventionally found in gender role research, the magnitudes of the correlations were in line with previous studies. For instance, Twenge’s largest reported correlation (Twenge, 1999) between gender role identity (as measured by the PAQ) and support for feminism was .25. Our largest was .29.

Conclusion

Placed within the context of seeking expanded support for feminism, our results offer a difficult lesson. Feminists who seek to increase support among men should emphasize definitions that do not view support for feminism as inconsistent with a masculine identity. In seeking to increase support among women, feminists should portray feminism as consistent with a feminine identity. An attempt to construct messages that achieve both goals will place feminists in a difficult rhetorical position. Emphasizing that support for feminism is consistent with a feminine identity might further entrench men’s opposition to the movement. Alternatively, messages that emphasize support for feminism is not at odds with a masculine identity might continue to reinforce women’s notion of feminists as non-feminine. One possible rhetorical strategy lies in the construction of messages based on alternative definitions of feminism. For example, bell hooks (2000) argued that feminism is about justice, which cannot be achieved just by ending sexism or racism, but rather must be about ending all forms of domination. Future research could be helpful in crafting rhetorical strategies to bridge this gap.

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Table I. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Men <i>M (SD)</i>	Women <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t</i>
Combined SRAI	73.39 (11.14)	84.15 (10.68)**	8.07
Consider self a feminist	2.15 (1.1)	2.83 (1.1)**	5.17
Nontraditional attitudes toward gender roles	28.38 (5.5)	33.60 (4.9)**	8.25
Attitudes toward women's movement	18.42 (4.06)	21.82 (3.99)**	7.01
SIS	760.17 (166.49)	1435.63 (205.97)**	30.87
PAQ masculinity	30.62 (4.53)	29.05 (3.90)**	3.06
PAQ femininity	29.75 (4.42)	32.68 (3.47)**	6.02
PAQ masculinity–femininity	22.69 (3.82)	25.92 (4.02)**	6.82

Note. *t* test of differences between men and women (one-tailed).

***p* < .05.

Table II. Correlation Coefficients Between Gender Role Identity and SRAI Scores

Variable	Men				Women			
	SIS	PAQ (M-F)	PAQ (M)	PAQ (F)	SIS	PAQ(M-F)	PAQ(M)	PAQ(F)
SRAI combined	.17*	.12	–.13	–.03	–.05	–.19*	.19**	–.12
Consider self a feminist	.25**	.01	–.21*	–.14	.02	–.15	.07	–.02
Nontraditional attitudes toward gender roles	.15	.08	–.05	–.00	.01	–.15	.21**	.04
Attitudes toward the women's movement	.20*	.11	–.16	–.07	.03	–.10	.12	–.10

p* < .01. *p* < .05 (1-tailed).