The Relationship Between Gender Role Ideals and Psychological Well-Being

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Previous research on the influence of gender roles upon psychological health has found that most effects may be due to participants' levels of masculine traits alone. This study investigated whether individual gender role ideals moderate the relationship between gender roles and psychological well-being. Eighty-three psychology undergraduate students of European descent were given a battery of measures of gender role and psychological well-being. Results of analysis of these tests suggest that the degree to which participants' gender-specific traits represent met or unmet ideals is a better predictor of psychological adjustment than personal gender role alone. Results also suggest that gender roles can diminish psychological well-being by creating conflict between personal beliefs about the nature of appropriate behavior and the actual demands of life situations. Theoretical implications and future research directions are discussed.

Prior to 1973, psychologists generally assumed that psychological health was promoted by congruence between one's physical and psychological gender. Constantinople (1973) was among the first to draw attention to and question this assumption, and subsequent studies have found little support for it (Brooks, Morgan, & Scherer, 1990; Orlofsky & O'Heron, 1987; Whitley, 1984). Since that time, psychologists have developed two major models of the influence of gender roles upon psychological well-being: the theoretically based androgyny model, which posits that well-being is enhanced by the possession of both masculine and feminine traits (Bem, 1975); and the empirically derived masculinity model, which holds that psychological

1This study was conducted as part of an undergraduate honors program.

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health depends primarily upon the possession of masculine traits regardless of physical gender (Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Taylor & Hall, 1982).

Past research has assumed that, in those cases where possession of masculine traits correlates with increased psychological well-being, it is because masculine traits are more culturally esteemed than feminine traits (Landrine, 1988). However, these studies have tended not to control for possible differences in cultural valuation of gender-typed traits as part of their experimental design, which may have influenced the results. Past research has also failed to control for the degree to which participants may personally value the masculine or feminine traits being assessed. Most studies have relied upon self-report measures of gender roles, which may be confounded by bias toward personally or socially valued traits, if not both. Yet little has been done in previous studies to control for these two confounds, or to distinguish them from one another. It is not necessarily true that, because society values certain traits for men and for women, each participant in a study will also personally value those same traits. And it is very possible that individual variances in gender role ideals will moderate the correlation between personal gender roles and psychological well-being.

The current study investigates the interactions between personal and societal values of gender role traits and various aspects of psychological well-being. First, the study verifies that masculine traits are in fact more esteemed by the participant population than feminine traits. Second, participants' scores on standard gender role assessment instruments are adjusted to reflect the degree to which each person values the specific masculine or feminine traits being measured, as well as the degree to which they believe they possess the trait. These adjusted scores can then be used to assess the degree to which personal ideals moderate the influence of gender role typing on psychological health.

The specific findings expected are that masculine traits will be more highly valued by the participants than feminine traits, and that the participants' perceived lack of gender-typed traits in comparison to their own gender role ideals will be a better predictor of psychological distress than the perceived level of such traits alone.

**METHOD**

*Subjects*

Participants were 26 males and 57 females, all of European descent and enrolled in upper division evening psychology courses at the University of Colorado—Denver. The average age of the participants was 31.4 years,