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MASCULINITY UNDER THREAT: ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE SUBJUGATION
OF NATURE

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ABSTRACT

The role that masculinity, and threats to masculinity, plays in affecting men's expression of their beliefs about nature and the behavioral choices they make about the use of natural resources were examined through an online study. After completing a personality inventory, male university students ($N = 86$), who had previously indicated in a prescreening measure the extent to which they endorsed masculine ideologies, were exposed to one of three randomly assigned conditions: 1) they were provided feedback indicating that they were relatively feminine, not masculine, and low in status (i.e., Masculinity threat); 2) the opposite (Masculinity reassurance) and 3) no feedback. Results show that (a) participants who endorsed masculine ideologies were more likely to endorse the utilization of nature and less likely to endorse the preservation of nature; (b) participants who were given masculinity reassurance were more likely to endorse the utilization of nature; (c) participants who were told that they were feminine (i.e., masculinity threat) were less apprehensive about other players actions during a 'Commons Dilemma' scenario. Results are interpreted as supporting the argument that masculine ideological beliefs can lead to attitudes and behavioral choices that would be harmful to the environment.

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Introduction

Unsustainable methods of energy use and the pervasive degradation of the environment are multi-dimensional challenges with a global scope of causes and consequences. The historical utilization of nature as a means to humanity's goals is undeniable. With one-half of the earth's land surface altered for human use (Vitousek et al, 1997), and with an increase of approximately 35% in CO₂ levels since the Industrial Revolution (Kutzbach et al, 2011), it appears that an historical narrative of utilization of nature has overpowered a narrative of preservation. What's more, though much is discussed in terms of the needed macro-changes in environmental sustainability, comparatively less is discussed in terms of micro-changes and individual behavior in environmental responsibility (Nautiyal, 2011). An examination of individual behaviors, and the motivations that underlie these behaviors may prove useful in understanding and shaping the way people orient themselves towards nature.

An examination of the various dimensions of identity formation and maintenance may provide insights into people's orientation towards nature. Gender ideologies and the maintenance of public representations of gender may influence people's behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts toward nature and issues involving environmental sustainability. This study aims to examine the role that masculinity, as one type of gender ideology, and the compulsive nature of maintaining masculine public representations have on issues related to environmental sustainability and the preservation of nature.

Maintenance of Masculinity

Masculinity in the West has been theorized in terms of a tri-partite model composed of dominance/competitiveness, toughness, and anti-femininity (Martin and Finn,

2010). The formation and maintenance of a masculine identity is shaped and governed by these attributes, and so is the maintenance of one's masculine public representation. Masculinity, as opposed to femininity, is proposed to be a much more precarious and socially tenuous identity to maintain. Supporting this assertion, Vandello et al (2008) found that when asked how men and women might lose their manhood and womanhood respectively, participants had little difficulty producing reasons associated with social transgressions for men, though for women, the reasons were connected more with physical/biological, and therefore more stable, aspects of the self. The precariousness of men's masculinity may influence men's motivations for chronically searching for milieu's in which to reassert such a chronically challenged status.

Other research has focused on the role that status maintenance goals prompted by threats to status plays in motivating men to engage in a variety behaviors that reassert/reestablish their (perceived) threatened status (Bosson et al 2009; Maass et al 2003, Holmes, 1971; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). These behaviors, stemming from Social Identity threats (Maass et al, 2003) and extending to threats specifically aimed at the individual (Bosson et al 2009), function to reduce the anxiety posed by threats to masculinity and to reassert status. Freud (1926) argued that this type of anxiety would qualify as neurotic anxiety, as opposed to healthy anxiety, for the precariousness of masculinity and the compulsive need to prove masculinity provide an internal danger, and a threat to the ego (Freud 1926/Beneke 1997). Moreover, because of the deep social emphasis on ego development, threats to masculinity are proposed to be profoundly influenced by changes in history and culture, and by extension how the compartment of masculinity is defined (Beneke, 1997). Thus, since dominance and high-status are such

integral aspects of the Western model of masculinity, threats to these elements may become a chronic stressor, which leads the ego to generate various symptoms and seemingly compulsive behaviors in order to protect itself (Beneke, 1997).

Under the specter of masculinity threat, research has focused on methods men find available to reestablish their threatened status. Maass et al (2003) found that when threat is received in the form of a Social Identity threat (i.e. threat to the value of one's group, in this case the group "men"), men responded with greater harassment of out-group members (i.e. women). Thus, harassment of women can function as a means to reassert their masculine status that was threatened via threat to their gender group.

Yet, men do not necessarily respond to threats to their masculinity with aggressive behavior. Bosson et al (2009) found that when men under a masculinity threat are presented with either a masculine aggressive task or an equally masculine but nonaggressive task, men chose the nonaggressive masculine task 80% of the time. In a related experiment, Bosson et al (2009) presented men under a masculinity threat with a choice only between a masculine aggressive task (punching a punching bag) or a nonmasculine task involving puzzles. The results of this second experiment revealed that although men in the masculinity threat condition selected the masculine aggressive task more than unthreatened men, those under the threat condition selected the masculine aggressive task only 50% of the time. These results seem to indicate that although men may resort to aggressive means of reestablishing their status, if presented with other options that are seen as sufficiently masculine, and more socially acceptable, they may be more prone to select those routes.

In the present study, we examine another manner in which might be able to assert

their masculinity and reestablish their status. Borden (1985) suggests that our current environmental crisis is simultaneously experienced as a crisis of and within the self, wherein larger cultural themes of competition, domination, and materialism shape our interactions with nature. The themes of competition and domination are consistent with masculine ideologies. We examine whether men's expressed beliefs about utilization versus preservation and whether men's behavioral choices about the use of natural resources are used as a way to assert their masculinity.

Beliefs about Utilization vs. Preservation of Nature

In the West, the image of nature as a force to be mastered has been in the collective consciousness for centuries, and prominently found root in the early enlightenment period. Further, the domination has been given a gendered tone. Francis Bacon, one of the early revolutionary thinkers during this period, expresses this attitude with poignant imagery:

"My only earthly wish is... to stretch the deplorably narrow limits of man's dominion over the universe to their promised bounds... [nature will be] bound into service, hounded in her wanderings and put on the rack and tortured for her secrets."

If such socially and scientifically sanctioned ideas about the use of nature are embedded within a culture, then mastering nature could be a means for men to reestablish their masculinity

Beliefs about preservation of nature contrast with these themes of domination that arguably justify utilization of nature (Milfont and Duckitt, 2006). For example, those who participate in community gardens and urban tree-planting programs establish a stronger

identification and feelings of mutual responsibility with their communities, compared to those who do not participate in such programs (Austin & Kaplan, 2004; Sommer, 2003; Stuart, 2005; von Hassell, 2005; in Clayton and Myers, 2009). Notions of caring, feeling empathy towards, and being concerned about environmental issues have historically been understood to be more consistent with women than men, and hence, femininity than masculinity (Rome, 2006). Such notions would be in conflict with the anti-feminine comportment of masculinity. However, it is also possible that protecting the environment, and acting as responsible stewards may carry more masculine connotations with them.

Behavioral Choices

Another important aspect of masculinity in relation to the treatment of nature involves the gendered nature of pro-and anti-environmental behaviors. People who reported engaging in environmentally friendly behaviors (such as drying clothes on a clothesline, taking public transportation, recycling, etc) were seen as being lower-status than those who did not engage in such environmentally friendly behaviors (Sadalla and Krull, 1995). Thus, men may resist engaging in pro-environmental behaviors to avoid being low in status.

Behavioral choices about the use of natural resources have particularly important implications for sustaining the natural environment. The impact of these types of behavioral choices is illustrated within the 'Common's Dilemma.' In *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Garrett Hardin lays out a scenario in which people share a common resource, and by acting through their own self-interest (i.e. make decisions with the goal of maximizing personal profit) eventually deplete the common resource, even when it is in

everyone's long-term interest not to exploit the resource in such a short-term oriented manner. However, having a cooperative and pro-social orientation, rather than a competitive and pro-self orientation mitigates the Commons Dilemma (Van Vugt, 2009). Cooperation and pro-social orientations are consistent with communal aspects of feminine gender roles where as competitive and pro-self orientations are consistent with agentic aspects of masculine roles (Eagly, 1987). Thus, it is possible that masculinity, in its drive to avoid appearing feminine, may lead men, particular those who endorse masculine gender ideologies, to be competitive and make choices that would lead to the destruction of a common natural resource.

Present research

The present research aims to explore the role that masculinity (and threats to masculinity) plays in affecting men's expression of their beliefs about nature and the behavioral choices they make about the use of natural resources. The role of status in maintaining a masculine public representation appears to indicate that status is something that must be compulsively proven, and is not a secure aspect of the self-concept. Under the specter of a threat to their masculinity, men may feel the need to reassert and prove their masculinity to others. I hypothesis that masculine ideology will be associated with a greater tendency to endorse beliefs that indicate people should utilize nature and a lesser tendency to endorse beliefs that indicate people should preserve nature. In addition, masculine ideology will be associated with a tendency to make behavioral choices that would lead to the destruction of commonly shared natural resources. I also hypothesize that when men's masculinity is threatened, their expressed attitudes about nature and their behavioral choices about using nature will reflect the need to reassert their

masculinity. More specifically, I predict that when men's masculinity is threatened they will be more likely to endorse beliefs that indicate people should utilize nature and have a lesser tendency to endorse beliefs that indicate people should preserve nature. They will also make behavioral choices that would lead to the destruction of a commonly shared natural resource. Lastly, I predict that this need to reassert masculinity will be stronger for men who endorse masculine ideological beliefs, specifically beliefs that indicate that they should be tough, high status, and not feminine. This will be revealed by the tendency for consequences of threats to masculinity to be stronger for men who endorse masculine ideological beliefs.

Methods

Design

The present study has a 2(Masculinity: Low vs. High) x 3(Feedback: Threatened, Reassured, and Control) between subjects design.

Participants

146 male participants who had previously completed the Masculine Sex Role Inventory in a mass screening in their introductory psychology course participated in the study. Those scoring at the bottom and top third of the Masculine Sex Role Inventory were selected. We removed 17 participants who did not pass the manipulation checks. We removed an additional 43 participant's data that suggested they were not fully attending to the information presented to them. Specifically, we removed participants who spent less than 15 seconds reading their alleged feedback and removed participants who spent more than 800 second completing the initial personality information or more than 500 seconds reading the feedback (suggesting that they had taken a break from

completing the study). This resulted in 86 participants in the study. There was no difference between those who were included or excluded from the study on their pretest scores or the type of feedback they received.

Procedures

After providing consent, the participants completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981) which functioned to give credibility to the feedback the participants received after completing the scale. Participants were randomly assigned to three different types of feedback, based off the design of the study: 1) threaten masculinity; 2) reassure masculinity; 3) no feedback. After receiving their randomly assigned feedback, participants complete the dependent measures which consisted of the Milfont and Duckitt (2006) Environmental Attitudes Scale and responses to a Common's Dilemma.

Stimulus Materials

Participants were randomly assigned to a masculinity threat, masculinity reassurance, or control condition. Participants in the two experimental conditions received feedback that addressed the tri-partite model of masculinity, theorizing that masculinity is composed of dominance/high-status, toughness, and anti-femininity. Feedback intended to threaten their masculinity conveyed that their responses to the previously completed personality inventory indicated that they were low-status, not tough, feminine and not masculine. Conversely, feedback intended to reassure participants of their masculinity conveyed that their responses to the personality inventory indicated that they were high-status, tough, not feminine, and masculine. In addition, in order to mask the manipulation, both received feedback as to their status on the Big 5 Personality Model (McAdams et al, 2006). The feedback consisted of a

personality profile, suggestions of viable career choices, and a graph illustrating their scores relative to other men. Participants in the control group did not receive any feedback.

Men in the masculinity threat condition read the following personality profile:

“Your responses to the previous items help determine certain attributes about your personality. You tend to be at ease with others though neither particularly extroverted or introverted. You are open to a variety of experiences, eager to seek out new and exciting opportunities. You are conscientious and thorough in tasks important to you. You avoid dominating conversation in your relationships, work and play. Though open and conscientious, you avoid challenging and difficult situations. On a continuum ranging from masculinity to femininity, you tend to be more feminine.”

They were told that viable career options were “bank teller, secretary, librarian,” etc, which were intended to represent low status, stereotypically feminine jobs. After this information, participants were presented with a graph indicating the extent to which they (compared to the average male at their university) were: conscientious, agreeable, neurotic, open to experience, extraverted, masculine, and feminine. The graph indicated that they were more feminine, and less masculine, than the average male at their university.

Men in the masculine reassurance condition read the following personality profile:

“Your responses to the previous items help determine certain attributes about your personality. You tend to be at ease with others though neither particularly

extroverted or introverted. You are open to a variety of experiences, eager to seek out new and exciting opportunities. You are conscientious and thorough in tasks important to you. You display your competence and leadership skills in a variety of settings. In your relationships, work and play, your dynamic personality comes out, and people look to you for answers. You are always eager to take on new challenging and difficult situations. On a continuum ranging from masculinity to femininity, you tend to be more masculine.”

They were told that viable career options were “CEO, manager, police chief, doctor,” etc, which were intended to represent high status, stereotypically masculine jobs. They received the same graph as those in the masculine threat condition except that the graph indicated that they were *less* feminine, and *more* masculine, than the average male at their university.

Manipulation check

After completing the measures, participants selected whether the feedback they received indicated that they were more masculine, less masculine, or as masculine as other men.

Dependent Measures

Environmental beliefs: Environmental beliefs were assessed with Milfont and Duckitt’s (2006) Environmental Preservation and Environmental Utilization Scale which is composed of two subscales. The nature utilization scale assesses the extent to which the participants believed that nature can be used as a means to achieve human goals, (e.g., “Human beings have the right to change and alter nature and all natural phenomena in order to serve human goals and objectives;” “It’s perfectly OK for humans to continue

using nature and natural resources in order to achieve human goals and objectives”). Cronbach alpha = .88. The second subscale assesses the extent to which participants believed nature should be preserved, (e.g., “It is critical that humans immediately stop using up the earth’s natural resources;” “It is important to persuade people that we cannot continue using the earth’s natural resources to satisfy our needs”), Cronbach alpha = .879.

Common’s Dilemma

Upon completing the Environmental Attitudes Scale, participants were then presented with a scenario that has been used in research on the ‘Commons Dilemma’ (Sheldon and McGregor, 2006). Participants were asked to pretend that they were the owner of a lumber company, and were presented with the circumstances in which they could log during a particular logging season. They were informed of the minimum and maximum amounts of timber they could log in one season, the regeneration rate of the trees per season, and the number (3) of other logging companies also logging in the forest. The participants were also presented with the idea that it may be in all of the companies’ collective advantage to make smaller bids, while at the same time warning of the danger that one’s own company may not make as substantial a profit as the other companies.

Participants then completed the same dependent measures that were used by in the Sheldon and McGregor (2000) study. Participants first provided their “Year 1 bid” as a measure of how much lumber they would cut for their company during the first logging season. Higher numbers would indicate a behavioral choice that would be more likely to destroy the commons. Next, using 7 point scales ranging from 0 to 6, participants indicated how much they would want to profit more than the other lumber companies (i.e.

a measure of *acquisitiveness*) and how much they think the other companies would cut this logging season (i.e. a measure of *apprehension*). These measures indicate the extent to which participants were taking a competitive orientation toward the situation.

Results

Utilization and Preservation of nature

For the Milfont and Duckitt (2006) Environmental Preservation and Utilization Scale, we expected 1) men with greater endorsement of masculine ideologies would score lower on preservation measures and higher on utilization than those who did not; 2) men in the masculinity threat condition would score lower on preservation measures and higher on utilization measures than men in the masculinity reassurance and control condition and 3) this latter pattern would be stronger for men who had a greater endorsement of masculine ideologies.

Effects for masculine ideology endorsement were consistent with predictions. Relative to those who did not endorse these ideologies, those who endorsed masculine ideologies were more likely to endorse the utilization of nature ($M = 4.55$ vs. 4.08 , for those high vs. low in masculinity, respectively), $F(1,80) = 3.45$, $p = .06$, and less likely to endorse the preservation of nature ($M = 4.90$ vs. 5.53 , for those high vs. low in masculinity, respectively), $F(1,80) = 7.45$, $p = .008$.

Opposite to predictions, those who were told that they were masculine were more likely to endorse the utilization of nature ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.66$) than those in either the control condition ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 2.54$) or those who were told that they were feminine ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.70$), $F(2,80) = 3.25$, $p = .04$. Also opposite to predictions, feedback had no effect on preservation ratings.

Behavioral Choices

We expected the logic of these previous predictions to extend to decisions within the common's dilemma scenario: 1) men with greater endorsement of masculine ideologies would have higher first year bids and have higher indices of acquisitiveness and apprehension; 2) men in the masculinity threat condition would have higher first year bids and higher indices of acquisitiveness and apprehension than men in the masculinity reassurance and control condition and 3) this latter pattern would be stronger for men who endorsed masculine ideologies.

For the Commons Dilemma section, there was no effect of endorsement of masculine ideological beliefs on first year bids, acquisitiveness and apprehensiveness. Further, there was no effect of feedback condition on first year bids or acquisitiveness. There was an effect for feedback on apprehensiveness; however, this result was opposite to predictions. Men in the Masculinity threat condition ($M=4.43$, $SD=2.83$) were significantly less apprehensive than men in the reassurance condition ($M=5.55$, $SD=2.78$) and the control condition ($M=5.30$, $SD=6.23$), $F(2,80)=3.52$, $p=.03$, and the latter two did not differ from each other.

Discussion

Results of the present study are consistent with the argument that masculine ideological beliefs can lead to attitudes and behavioral choices that would be harmful to the environment. That is, endorsement of masculine ideological beliefs was associated with more endorsement of beliefs supporting utilizing nature (albeit marginally significant) and less endorsement of beliefs supporting preserving nature. Our predictions about masculinity threat were not supported. However, the pattern of results is interesting

because they suggest that men were following gender norms, based upon the gender descriptions of themselves that were provided to them. Specifically, when men were told that they were masculine, they endorsed beliefs that indicated a desire to utilize nature and when they were told that they were feminine, they were less apprehensive in the Common's Dilemma. The latter effects suggest that participants who believed that they were feminine perceived the Common's Dilemma less competitively.

Future research

Future research may wish to use a different measure of behavioral choices. The first year bids were our primary dependent measure about behavior choices. Other studies, however, have placed participants in a more interactive context that could tell not only how they would start their behavioral choices but whether they would deplete resources faster than others (Gifford, 1996). It may still be possible to find our predicted effects with changes to the model of behavioral choices. Second, future research might employ a more public venue for the masculinity threat. It could be that feedback over the web is not sufficiently threatening. Maass et al (2003) were successful in implementing a Social Identity threat via computers in their study of men sexually harassing women as a means to regain status. Yet, participants in the Maass et al (2003) study completed the measures in the lab. Further, Bosson's study (2009) with masculinity threat was also done in a lab context. The public nature of masculinity might require a more public audience for the threat to be effective.

Conclusion

The results from the present study suggest that altering men's self-image to include feminine qualities might be a way to mitigate the damaging effects of masculine

ideologies. However, prior to concluding this, future research should more fully test the implications of this strategy because of the possibility that it may backfire, as other studies would suggest it would, particularly in a public context.

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