



Manly to the core: Measuring men's implicit masculine self-concept via the Semantic Misattribution Procedure[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Masculine self-concept refers to a man's psychological sense of being male. In this study, we used the Semantic Misattribution Procedure to assess men's implicit masculine self-concept. As expected, implicit masculine self-concept was not associated with social desirability, but was positively associated with several gender-relevant outcomes, including conformity to masculine norms, endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. We also found support for a mediation model in which explicit masculine self-concept mediated the impact of implicit masculine self-concept on these outcomes. These results provide evidence for the importance of implicit masculine self-concept when exploring gender-relevant outcomes.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Defining and measuring the masculine self-concept

What does it mean to be masculine? According to one of the earliest theories of gender identity, this can refer to “men's psychological sense of being male” (Spence & Buckner, 1995, p. 135). In line with other researchers, we use the term *masculine self-concept* to refer to this psychological sense of being male (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). Most researchers define and measure the masculine self-concept in terms of *content* by focusing on the extent that a man displays personality characteristics or behaviors that are stereotypically associated with men (e.g., risk-taking). Of these, commonly used measures are the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). However, a major concern with this content approach is that it does not allow for variability in how masculinity is defined and instead imposes definitions that are stereotypically- and culturally-based (Wong et al., 2013). For example, a man may gain a sense of his masculinity by caring for his children, although such nurturing behavior is typically defined as feminine. Another limitation of this content approach is that men might attribute the characteristics they endorse on a self-report masculinity measure (e.g.,

aggression) to factors other than their gender (e.g., personality, culture; Wong et al., 2013).

Alternatively, others argue that masculinity should be defined and measured in regards to *structure* by focusing on the connection between masculine concepts (e.g., macho, manly) and a man's sense of self (Burkley, Wong, & Bell, 2016). This structural approach is more consistent with how the self-concept is classically defined, as a cognitive association between the self and some attribute (Greenwald et al., 2002). By focusing on structure rather than content, this approach defines masculinity in a way that separates one's sense of masculinity from specific characteristics culturally ascribed to men and allows for individual differences in what it means to be masculine.

Regardless of whether the focus is on content or structure, using explicit measures to assess the masculine self-concept is problematic (Asendorpf, Banse, & Mucke, 2002). Because gender self-concepts develop early in life (Bem, 1993), they often operate outside of people's conscious awareness and personal control. Furthermore, men who do not have a strong sense of masculinity may be reluctant to explicitly admit this on a questionnaire. In support of this assertion, a large body of work indicates that men are motivated to avoid appearing feminine (e.g., Kierski & Blazina, 2009; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). To address these concerns, we sought, in this study, to develop a new measure of implicit masculine self-concept.

1.2. Implicit assessments of the masculine self-concept

Implicit measures are thought to capture constructs that respondents may be unable or unwilling to report, thereby circumventing introspection and social desirability concerns (Payne & Gawronski,

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2010). Although there is debate regarding what “implicit” means and whether it reflects truly unconscious processes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), the defining feature of any implicit measure is that it assesses constructs indirectly via behavioral responses, compared to explicit measures that assess constructs directly via self-report.

Implicit measures are frequently used to assess self-concept constructs (e.g., self-esteem, personality). Consistent with these measures, we define the *implicit masculine self-concept* (IMSC) as the automatic associations between the self and masculine concepts. Measuring the masculine self-concept in this way potentially enables researchers to capture aspects of the self that are beyond respondents’ awareness or control (Briñol, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006). To our knowledge, the only studies to do so have focused exclusively on one instrument: the IAT (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). The IAT uses response latencies to indirectly measure the associative strength between two concepts (e.g., male vs. female) and two attributes (e.g., self vs. others). Respondents are presented with stimuli that represent the four categories and are asked to sort the stimuli into two categories (e.g., sort as male/self and female/others). It is assumed that a man with a strong masculine self-concept would respond quicker to trials that involve the male/self pairings than the female/self pairings.

Research using the IAT has shown that men show a stronger association between self and male than between self and female (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Moreover, IMSC (measured via the IAT) shows small but positive correlations with the BSRI and PAQ (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). However, research on IMSC is still in its infancy, and several questions remain. First, it is unknown how IMSC relates to gender-relevant variables beyond gender identity. For example, are men with a more masculine implicit self-concept more likely to display sexism or conform to masculine norms?

A second issue with this prior work is that it has relied solely on the IAT. Although the IAT is a popular implicit measure with good psychometric properties (e.g., Bar-Anan & Nosek, 2014), it has also been criticized for its complex dual-task structure and the possibility that it measures additional constructs such as concept similarity or cultural knowledge (e.g., Blanton & Jaccard, 2006).

An alternative to the IAT is the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP; Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005; Payne, Burkley, & Stokes, 2008). The AMP is a sequential priming task that assesses people’s implicit attitudes through evaluations of ambiguous stimuli. Unlike the IAT which measures reaction times to sets of stimuli, the AMP measures simple evaluations (e.g., pleasant or unpleasant ratings). For each AMP trial, participants are first presented briefly (but not subliminally) with a prime (e.g., male vs. female words). Immediately following this prime, participants rate an ambiguous target (e.g., Chinese character) as pleasant or unpleasant. This rating serves as an implicit measure of their attitudes toward the prime. Although the AMP has also received criticism, it has been shown to be a reliable and valid implicit measure (Bar-Anan & Nosek, 2014).

The AMP has spawned successive iterations, including a version that assesses semantic rather than affective associations. For the Semantic Misattribution Procedure (SMP; Sava et al., 2012), the same AMP stimuli are used but participants rate the extent that the ambiguous target reflects them as a person using a “does fit me” or “does not fit me” rating. This modification allows researchers to assess implicit associations between the primes and the respondent’s self-concept.

1.3. Predictions for present work

In using the SMP to assess men’s IMSC, we sought to expand on prior IAT research in several ways. First, we tested the relationship between men’s IMSC and social desirability. Because implicit measures are thought to circumvent social desirability concerns (e.g., Payne & Gawronski, 2010), we expected IMSC would not be significantly related to social desirability.

Second, we predicted that IMSC would modestly and positively correlate with other gender-relevant variables, including conformity to masculine norms, endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism. Such a pattern has been shown with explicit masculinity measures (Burkley et al., 2016), but it remains to be seen if the same relationship exists for an implicit self-concept measure. Additionally, we tested the link between IMSC and a non-gender variable – intention to seek counseling for psychological and interpersonal concerns. Given that explicit measures of masculinity have been shown to be negatively correlated with attitudes toward psychological help seeking (Mahalik et al., 2003), we hypothesized that men’s IMSC would also be negatively related to their intention to seek counseling for psychological and interpersonal concerns.

Lastly, we sought to examine how implicit and explicit masculine self-concepts relate to each other and contribute to other outcomes. According to Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2006), there are different ways that implicit and explicit concepts may influence each other. One possibility is that explicit concepts may serve as input to implicit concepts (i.e., *explicit input model*). In this model, a man’s explicit, conscious sense of masculinity provides the basis for his implicit sense of masculinity, which in turn impacts other outcomes. This would suggest, for example, that a man’s level of sexism is based most directly on his IMSC, which itself is shaped by his explicit masculine self-concept. Alternatively, implicit concepts may serve as input to explicit concepts (i.e., *implicit input model*). In this model, a man’s implicit sense of masculinity provides the basis for his explicit, conscious sense of masculinity, which in turn impacts other outcomes (e.g., sexism). Accordingly, we tested two competing mediation models. We expected to find stronger support for the implicit input model for two reasons. First, because the outcomes in question are based on self-report measures, we expected the outcomes would reflect the direct effect of a deliberate reasoning process, meaning the effect of the implicit concept should be indirect and thereby mediated by the explicit concept. Second, implicit beliefs—including those regarding gender—reflect experiences and associations that develop early in life and as such, they likely precede more deliberate, explicit beliefs (Bem, 1993).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 255 undergraduate men from a large Southwestern university. Data from participants who could read Chinese ($n = 9$) were removed because the target was no longer ambiguous (Payne et al., 2005), resulting in 246 men (mean age = 20.21 years, $SD = 2.36$). Of these, 75% were White/Caucasian, 5% were Black/African American, 6% were American Indian/Native American, 3% were Latino/Hispanic American, 2% were Asian/Asian American, 5% indicated a multiracial background, and 2% did not identify. Participants were recruited for the study from the university’s psychology participant pool, completed all measures online, and compensated with class credit.

2.2. Procedure and measures

2.2.1. IMSC Measure

To measure IMSC, we developed a modified version of the SMP, which we refer to as the “IMSC Measure” (Sava et al., 2012; see Fig. 1). Three categories of prime words were used: masculine words (*male, masculine, manly, macho, manhood, masculinity, alpha male, manliness, machismo*), feminine words (*female, feminine, womanly, lady, ladylike, womanhood, femininity, effeminate, girly*), and neutral words (*tree, wagon, temperature, green, quarter, quote, customers, library, liquid*). Selection of masculine and feminine words was based on previous masculinity theory and research (e.g., Burkley et al., 2016; Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). Consistent with prior AMP research (e.g., Imura, Burkley, & Brown, 2014), each word was presented twice, resulting in

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