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# Gender Role Orientation and Fearfulness in Children With Anxiety Disorders

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**Abstract**—Research on gender differences in children's fears has generally shown that girls are more fearful than boys. A common hypothesis offered for this finding is that gender role orientations or expectations may be operating. However, this hypothesis has not been directly investigated in child samples. The present study examined the relation between a self-report measure of gender role orientation (i.e., masculinity/femininity) and the intensity of self-reported fears in a clinic sample of children ( $N = 66$ ; ages 6–11; 41 boys and 25 girls) with anxiety disorders. Results revealed that masculinity was negatively related to overall levels of fearfulness as well as specific fears of failure and criticism, medical fears, and fears of the unknown. In contrast, no relation was found between femininity and fearfulness. These findings suggest that gender role orientation, especially masculinity, may play a role in the development and/or maintenance of fearfulness in children. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Gender role; Fears; Masculinity; Femininity; Children

Studies on children's fears, employing self-, parent-, teacher-, and peer-ratings, consistently find that girls perceive themselves, or are perceived by others, as having a greater number of intense fears and higher overall levels of fearfulness compared to boys (e.g., Gullone & King, 1993; Ollendick, Yang, Dong, Xia, & Lin, 1995; Silverman & Nelles, 1988b). Gender differences also

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have been found in the content of children's fears, with girls reporting relatively more fears of small animals, danger, death, and safety, as compared to boys (e.g., Gullone & King, 1993; Morris & Kratochwill, 1983). Despite these consistent findings, surprisingly few studies have investigated potential factors that may account for these gender differences in child fearfulness.

One of the most common explanations for these gender differences in child fearfulness is that of gender role orientation, that is, differences in levels of masculinity and femininity (Ollendick et al., 1995). In short, the explanation given is that girls and boys are socialized to develop gender- or sex-typed feminine and masculine behaviors, traits, and skills. Indeed, according to theories on the development of gender roles, expressing fearfulness is more consistent with the feminine gender role; thus such emotion and related behavior (e.g., avoidance of feared objects) may be tolerated, accepted or encouraged in girls (e.g., Bem, 1981; Golombok & Fivush, 1994). Conversely, because fearfulness is inconsistent with the masculine gender role, such emotion and related behavior may be less tolerated or accepted in boys; boys may be expected to display more instrumental traits (e.g., self-confidence) and consequently learn ways to reduce their level of fear (e.g., Bem, 1981; Golombok & Fivush, 1994).

Support for a relation between gender role orientation and fearfulness has been found in studies using adult populations (e.g., Carey, Dusek, & Spector, 1988; Dillon, Wolf, & Katz, 1988; Tucker & Bond, 1997). For instance, Carey et al. (1988) administered the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Fear Survey Schedule-II (FSS; Geer, 1965; a fear inventory for adults) to 95 female and 77 male undergraduates. Relevant here, were findings that males and females who endorsed a feminine gender role orientation on the Bem scale rated themselves as most fearful on the fear inventory, while those who endorsed a masculine gender role orientation rated themselves as least fearful on the fear inventory.

In a similar study, Dillon et al. (1988) administered the Bem Sex Role Inventory and the Wolpe Fear Inventory (Wolpe, 1969) to 199 college students (122 males and 77 females). Consistent with previous research, findings revealed that both males and females who were classified as feminine (based on the Bem Sex Role Inventory) scored higher on the fear inventory, as compared with individuals classified as masculine. More recently, Tucker and Bond (1997), as part of a larger study on gender and disgust in fear of animals, examined the relation between gender role orientation and fearfulness. Specifically, 96 Australian adults (43 males, 53 females) were administered a variety of self-report measures of animal fears, disgust and contamination sensitivity, and gender role orientation (i.e., the Australian Sex Role Scale; Antill, Cunningham, Russell, & Thompson, 1981). Findings relevant to gender role orientation and fearfulness indicated that femininity, but not masculinity, scores were correlated with measures of animal fears. Taken together, the above research findings obtained with adult samples show a relation between

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