



## Gender role conformity and aggression: Influence of perpetrator and victim conformity on direct physical aggression in women

Dennis E. Reidy<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Colleen A. Sloan<sup>a</sup>, Amos Zeichner<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Georgia, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL 36688-0002, United States

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### ABSTRACT

The wealth of literature indicating that men are more physically aggressive than women may be the reason for the dearth of research on physical aggression in women. However, recent research has found that this discrepancy is better attributed to conformity to gender roles rather than to biological sex. The purpose of the present study was to assess the influence of masculine and feminine gender role conformity on direct physical aggression in women. One-hundred eighty four women were recruited to compete in a sham aggression paradigm against either a hyperfeminine (gender role conforming) or hypofeminine (gender role violating) confederate woman. Results indicated that women evinced more physical aggression toward a hypofeminine woman than toward her hyperfeminine counterpart. Moreover, endorsement of masculine traits by female aggressors was positively correlated with behavioral and self-reports of physical aggression. Femininity was unrelated to behavioral indices of physical aggression but negatively correlated with self-reports of aggression. Findings are discussed in reference to the increased risk of victimization of women who deviate from gender-specific role norms and the impact of perpetrator gender role adherence on aggressive behavior. Future examination of differential effects of general nonconformity on aggression as an alternative explanation of the findings is required.

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### 1. Introduction

“Although gender is a very attractive and frequently examined variable among those who are interested in understanding aggression, its appeal may be greater than its explanatory power” (Richardson & Hammock, 2007; p. 418). Gender effects, particularly as they pertain to the perpetration of aggression, have been examined extensively with multiple methodologies and experimental designs, across disparate populations and settings, and on varying types of aggressive behavior. Results from crime statistics (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2007), self-report data (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007), behavioral experiments (Gussler-Burkhardt & Giancola, 2005; Verona, Reed, Curtin, & Pole, 2007), developmental research (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004), and comprehensive meta-analyses (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Frodi, Macaulay, & Thorne, 1977) have consistently indicated that men evince more direct physical aggression relative to women (Richardson & Hammock, 2007). For example crime statistics indicate that men commit more than half of all homicides, are the predominant perpetrators of rape and domestic

violence against women, and are the typical perpetrators of antigay aggression (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2007; NCAVP, 2007). In the laboratory, men administer more shocks to a confederate at greater intensity, and administer the highest available shock at greater proportions than women. In contrast, women demonstrate a longer latency before becoming aggressive and initiate aggression at lower intensities than men (Zeichner, Parrott, & Frey, 2003). This pattern of gender differences in the aggression literature is likely the reason that *physical aggression* is sparsely studied in women relative to men.

Researchers have also attempted to address the unique effects of victim gender on the occurrence of aggressive acts. Harris examined gender differences in victimization of aggression and found that men were more likely to have been the target of more forms of aggression (Harris, 1992), that men reported perpetrating more aggression toward men than women (Harris, 1995), and that men had experienced more aggression than women over their lifetime (Harris, 1996). Richardson and Green (1999) examined gender effects on direct aggression in same-gender and opposite-gender dyads. The authors found that both men and women endorsed more frequent incidents of direct aggression toward men than toward women, indicating that gender of target influences aggressive behavior. Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, and McGillicuddy-DeLisi (2007) explored gender effects on perceptions of aggressive behavior and found that physical aggression toward women was

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of South Alabama, Mobile, AL 36688-0002, United States. Tel.: +1 251 460 7280; fax: +1 251 460 6320.

E-mail address: [reidy@usouthal.edu](mailto:reidy@usouthal.edu) (D.E. Reidy).

rated as less acceptable and more harmful than when the target was a man. As a whole, extant data would seem to suggest that men are more likely than women to be perpetrators and victims of aggressive behavior.

However, in a recent review of the literature on gender and aggression, Richardson and Hammock (2007) note that the apparent gender differences in aggressive behavior may actually reflect a response to one's gender role. Gender role orientation represents the extent to which a person conforms to masculine or feminine norms associated with the respective gender by demonstrating socially prescribed attitudes, beliefs, and behavior congruent with being "masculine" or "feminine." Several studies have investigated the unique influence of gender role orientation on aggression. For example, Hammock and Richardson (1992) examined effects of both gender and gender role orientation on aggressive behavior in a laboratory aggression paradigm. Although both sex and gender role, particularly masculinity, predicted aggressiveness, masculinity predicted aggressiveness better than gender, suggesting that gender role has a greater impact on aggressive behavior than gender alone. Kogut, Langley, and O'Neal (1992) found that women who endorsed a high level of masculinity were more aggressive than their nonmasculine counterparts. Gini and Pozzoli (2006) explored the association between gender role and children's bullying. The authors found that femininity was unrelated to bullying in both boys and girls, while a strong association between bullying and masculinity was found in boys, ( $r = .62, p < .001$ ) and in girls, ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ). Moreover, when gender was entered with gender role (i.e., masculinity and femininity) into a hierarchical regression analysis, masculinity explained approximately 16% of the variance, while gender and femininity did not explain an appreciable proportion of variance. Walker, Richardson, and Green (2000) investigated the effects of gender role on direct and indirect aggressive tendencies in a sample of elderly men and women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 71$ ). They found that masculinity was positively associated with reported indirect aggression while femininity was negatively associated with reported direct aggression. Likewise, Kinney, Smith, and Donzella (2001) explored effects of gender role on expression of anger and verbal aggressiveness in a group of collegiate men and women. Results indicated that masculinity was positively correlated with expression of anger as well as verbal aggressiveness, whereas femininity was negatively correlated with both. Taken as a whole, results of these studies highlight the influence of gender role conformity on an individual's endorsement and expression of aggression, and they suggest that masculine gender role conformity is associated with increased perpetration of aggression. However, to date, the study of effects of feminine gender role conformity on aggression has been equivocal and warrants further exploration.

In reference to the effect of the victims' gender role conformity on aggression, studies have primarily focused on men's role violations. Moreover, these studies have typically utilized "extreme" violations of gender roles such as depiction of homosexual behavior. The totality of the data indicate that men who endorse traditional masculine beliefs are more aggressive toward gay men (e.g., Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001; Parrott & Peterson, 2008; Parrott, Peterson, Vincent, & Bakeman, 2008). Rarely has the effect of women's role violations been studied in the laboratory. In one study, Parrott and Gallagher (2008) found that women who conform to traditional gender roles experience increased anger after viewing video depicting female gender role violations. Again, this manipulation involved "extreme" violations demonstrated by viewing sexual acts by same sex dyads. To our knowledge, no published studies have examined effects of gender role violations without using sexual violations in women.

The purpose of the present study was to replicate and expand upon previous findings by examining effects of perpetrator and

victim gender role conformity on women's direct physical aggression. To do this we employed a laboratory shock paradigm. In reference to femininity, the literature provides mixed support for its relation to aggression. The majority of literature reviewed yielded no relation between femininity and aggression. Although two studies found a significant negative correlation (i.e., Kinney et al., 2001; Walker et al., 2000), neither of these studies used behavioral measures of physical aggression. Moreover, Hammock and Richardson (1992) who utilized a similar aggression paradigm found no relation between femininity and behavioral indices of physical aggression, despite finding a negative association with self-reported aggression. For these reasons, we did not expect a significant relationship between femininity and physical aggression in the present study. However, we hypothesized that femininity would negatively correlate with self-reports of aggression. We expected a significant positive relationship between perpetrator masculinity and all indices of aggression. With regard to gender role conformity of the target, we hypothesized that a hypofeminine woman (i.e., role violating) would elicit more aggression relative to a hyperfeminine (role conforming) woman. This hypothesis is based on research suggesting that women become angry in response to role violating women (e.g., Parrott & Gallagher, 2008). Finally, we expected that positive correlation between perpetrator masculinity and physical aggression would be significantly larger when used against a hypofeminine target relative to a hyperfeminine target.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and experimental design

One-hundred eighty four undergraduate women ( $M_{\text{age}} = 18.8$ ;  $M_{\text{education}} = 13.9$  years; 76.5% Caucasians; modal income = \$70,000) participated in this study. Four women chose not to participate in the study after learning they could be shocked electrically. The remaining women were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Women in the "hyperfeminine" condition ( $n = 90$ ) believed they were competing against a woman who conforms to feminine norms while women in the "hypofeminine" condition ( $n = 90$ ) believed that they were competing against a woman who does not likewise conform.

### 2.2. Materials

**Demographic form.** Participants completed a brief demographic form assessing age, race, education level, and average yearly income.

**The conformity to masculine norms inventory (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003)** assesses attitudes, actions, thoughts, and feelings congruent with masculine norms. The inventory comprises 11 distinct factors: winning, emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, playboy, self-status, primacy of work, power over women, disdain for homosexuals, and pursuit of status. The CMNI was used in the current study to measure the extent to which women endorse masculine traits. In the current sample,  $\alpha = .93$ .

**The conformity to feminine norms inventory (CFNI; Mahalik et al., 2005)** was designed to assess women's adherence to an array of feminine norms found in the dominant US culture. The CFNI comprises eight distinct factors: nice in relationships, thinness, modesty, domestic, care for children, romantic relationships, sexual fidelity, and investment in appearance. In the current sample,  $\alpha = .88$ .

**Buss aggression questionnaire (BAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992).** The Buss aggression questionnaire is a 29-item self-report scale that is used to assess physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility. For the present study we examined the total score

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