



Physiological stress response to loss of social influence and threats to masculinity



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ABSTRACT

Social influence is an important component of contemporary conceptualizations of masculinity in the U.S. Men who fail to achieve masculinity by maintaining social influence in the presence of other men may be at risk of stigmatization. As such, men should be especially likely to exhibit a stress response to loss of social influence in the presence of other men. This study assesses whether men who lose social influence exhibit more of a stress response than men who gain social influence, using data collected in a laboratory setting where participants were randomly assigned into four-person groups of varying sex compositions. The groups were videotaped working on two problem-solving tasks. Independent raters assessed change in social influence using a well-validated measure borrowed from experimental work in the Status Characteristics Theory tradition. Cortisol is used as a measure of stress response because it is known to increase in response to loss of social esteem. Results show that young men who lose social influence while working with other young men exhibit cortisol response. In contrast women do not exhibit cortisol response to loss of social influence, nor do men working with women. Results are consistent with the hypothesis that loss of social influence in men may be associated with a physiological stress response because maintaining social influence is very important to men while in the presence of other men. This physiological response to loss of social influence underscores the importance to men of achieving masculinity through gaining and maintaining social influence, and avoiding the stigma associated with the failure to do so.

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Introduction

Scholars have long been interested in how social status is linked to physiological stress response (Gesquiere et al., 2011; Hamer, O'Donnell, Lahiri, & Steptoe, 2010; Nicolson, 2008; Sapolsky, 2005; Scheepers, Ellemers, & Sintemaartensdijk, 2009; Shively & Clarkson, 1994). Although initial work focused on stress response among low status groups, recent work has shown that in some conditions – namely in the presence of status threats or in unstable status hierarchies – being a member of a high status group can also cause a physiological stress response, including cortisol response and high systolic blood pressure (Sapolsky, 2005; Scheepers, 2009; Scheepers, et al., 2009). In addition, threats to dominance and social influence appear especially likely to cause stress and anxiety among members of groups with high social status (Gesquiere et al., 2011; Pascoe, 2007; Sapolsky, 2005; Scheepers, 2009; Scheepers et al., 2009).

Within this broader literature this project assesses whether loss of social influence among one high-status group, men, is associated with stress response. This project assesses social influence change among men because social influence is an important component of social constructions of masculinity in the contemporary U.S. and as such should “matter locally” to the men in this study (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Connell, 1987; Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008; Yang, 2013: 1). In particular the project examines whether physiological response is likely when men lose social influence in the presence of other men, using a well-validated measure to evaluate whether study participants gain or lose social influence while working with a small-group on problem-solving tasks in a laboratory setting. In this project, loss of social influence is linked to cortisol response. Cortisol is a stress hormone that is responsive to threats to social influence and status (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004; Sapolsky, 2005) and is associated with negative health outcomes (Hamer et al., 2010; Nicolson, 2008), suggesting a potential link between loss of social influence and health. Previous research has provided evidence that men should have a cortisol

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response to loss of social influence when in the presence of other men but this project is a novel test of whether this actually occurs.

Masculinity, social influence and stigma

Power and social influence are key components of hegemonic masculinity (the dominant form of masculinity) (Connell, 1987, 1995; Kimmel, 1994; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Sumerau, 2012). For example, in an ethnographic account of daily life in a California high school, Pascoe (2007) describes how young men routinely jockey for social influence and power. In particular, demonstrations of competence and social influence in goal-oriented, decision-making contexts are an essential component of enacting masculinity in day-to-day interactions (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Men are expected to strive to embody hegemonic notions of masculinity, including demonstrating social influence and competence, and when they are seen as falling short they are socially sanctioned through ridicule and violence (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007). Most of this social sanctioning comes from other men (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007).

As such, men are socially “accountable” for enacting masculinity, which can be difficult because masculinity is tenuous and socially accomplished (Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Vandello et al., 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1987: 136). Men cannot assume that they will be seen as sufficiently masculine just by virtue of being biological men because masculinity is “precarious” and it is easy for men to fall short in their efforts (Bosson & Vandello, 2011: 82; Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007). Because masculinity is precarious men often react to masculinity threats, including threats to social influence, with shame, defensiveness, and anxiety (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Vandello et al., 2008).

Given the importance of masculinity, its tenuousness, and its relationship to social status, men are likely to be wary of what might be called *the stigma of failed manhood*. I argue that even the threat of failed manhood, measured in this project through loss of social influence, may cause stress response. Failing at manhood is characterized by widely accepted conceptualizations of stigma. Men who fail at manhood are: labeled and associated with negative stereotypes (weak, impotent, disgusting, etc.); set apart from others; experience discrimination and loss of status; and aversion to the stigma of failed manhood serves the function of norm enforcement (Link & Phelan, 2001; Pascoe, 2007; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio, 2008). For example, one reason gay men are stigmatized is because they are perceived as not adequately achieving masculinity (Pascoe, 2007; Sumerau, 2012). Other men who are perceived as not adequately achieving masculinity are also stigmatized – including the unemployed, homeless, mentally ill, and disabled (Hansen, Bourgeois, Drucker, Arno, & Viola, 2013).

Men are especially socially accountable for enacting masculinity in the presence of other men (Bosson, Taylor, & Prewitt-Freilino, 2006; Burn, 2000; Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007; Vandello et al., 2008). As such, because social influence is an important component of masculinity, the maintenance of social influence in the presence of other men is especially important. Pascoe (2007) describes, for example, how harassment of women is typically intended to demonstrate dominance and influence to male peers, not necessarily to attract women (Quinn, 2002). Young men appear to be especially sensitive to these pressures, likely because they are in transition from being a child to being a “real man” (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Pascoe, 2007; Vandello et al., 2008: 1327). When young men fail to achieve perceived social influence they are teased, harassed and attacked by other men (Kimmel, 1994; Pascoe, 2007). Such research suggests that threats to social influence are likely to have a stigmatizing effect, which will be particularly acute when experienced with other men.

Cortisol, status and social influence

As a potential stressor, threats to social influence are likely to produce a physiological response. Such responses are often measured with cortisol, a stress hormone that increases with the activation of physiological systems related to threats to “social esteem or social status” (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004: 357). For example cortisol reliably increases in response to verbal criticism by an experimenter during public speaking or mental arithmetic tasks in laboratory settings (Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). In some contexts then cortisol should increase in response to loss of social influence, and especially if such loss represents a threat to masculinity. This project uses a well-validated measure of social influence drawn from the Status Characteristics Theory (SCT; Mendelson, Thurston, & Kubzansky, 2008; Ridgeway, Backor, Li, Tinkler, & Erickson, 2009) tradition to assess whether loss of social influence is associated with cortisol response in men in the presence of other men. The measure quantifies the amount of social influence participants have when working in a small-group on a problem-solving task in a laboratory setting.

Decades of SCT research have documented that individuals possess socially significant characteristics (e.g. age, race/ethnicity or gender) that are culturally associated with differing levels of competence and social worthiness – that is, social status (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). In SCT, social influence is measured as the amount of social influence a class of people has in decision-making tasks in small-groups (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). For example, group members are more likely to adopt the suggestion of a man than a woman when working on a decision-making task, because men are expected to be more competent than women on most tasks and are expected to make more valuable contributions to the group (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Men have a higher value on the status characteristic of gender than women and more valued states of status characteristics are linked to higher performance expectations.

Drawing on SCT, I conceptualize the relationship between social status and social influence as follows. A class of people (such as men, European-Americans, or the college-educated) on average have a predictable amount of social influence in goal-oriented decision-making tasks compared to other groups with a higher or lower (for example, women, African-Americans, or those with a high-school education) value of a status characteristic (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003). Thus one’s status characteristics are relatively stable in a given context (one does not move easily between genders, ethnic identities or education levels). In contrast, one’s social influence does vary – in one context one might have a moderate amount of influence while in another context one might have very little influence. Social influence is linked to status characteristics, however, in that classes of people with the higher value of a status characteristic, for example men, will on average have a higher level of social influence than those with the lower value of a status characteristic (for example, women) (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

The current study

While work on SCT has not attempted to link SCT’s measure of social influence to cortisol response, such links are likely. This is because social influence threat should be associated with physiological stress response among members of a group who are homogenous on a high value of a status characteristic (in this case, groups of men-with-men). In order to make this link, I investigate the relationship between loss of social influence and cortisol response in small groups of young adults of systematically varied sex composition in a laboratory setting.

Research shows that high ranking group members are most vulnerable to physiological stress, including cortisol response,

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