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Sensation seeking, felt gender compatibility and psychosocial adjustment in women

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Abstract

Past research has linked higher felt gender compatibility with higher psychosocial adjustment (Egan and Perry, 2001), and sensation seeking (SS) with masculinity and poorer psychosocial adjustment (Zuckerman, 1979; 1994). The present study hypothesized that women high in SS would report low levels of felt gender compatibility and adjustment, and that felt compatibility would mediate the relationship between SS and psychosocial adjustment in women. In line with predictions, certain forms of felt gender compatibility mediated the relationship between certain forms of SS and psychosocial adjustment. Boredom susceptibility was most problematic for women at a state university, whereas disinhibition was most problematic for women at a religious university. Results replicate and extend past research, and suggest potential interventions for high SS women experiencing low levels of felt gender compatibility.

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1. Introduction

In 1869, John Stuart Mill wrote that “Women are what we have required them to be”. More than a century later women are still absorbing the rules of a culture laden with an ascribed female gender role that emphasizes being submissive, weak, feminine, dependent and emotional (Chrisler, 1989; Williams & Best, 1982). While some women may find their values, interests, and/or personality compatible with a traditional female gender role, others clearly do not, and this lack of felt compatibility with a traditional female gender role can have unfortunate negative consequences for women’s psychosocial adjustment (Egan & Perry, 2001; O’Heron & Orlofsky, 1990). In therapy, these “non-traditional” women often report a paucity of female friendships, a feeling of competition with “feminine” women, and the relative ease with which they maintain friendships with male peers. Of primary interest to the current study is the fact that these young women also often present with a series of risky behaviors that may include multiple sexual partners, drug and alcohol use, depressive symptoms, and seemingly “rough edges”. As explained in more detail below, this pattern suggests that such women may be high in what Zuckerman (1979) has called the trait of sensation seeking, which, it is relevant to note, has been linked to more masculine interests (Daitzman & Zuckerman, 1980) and poorer psychosocial adjustment (Zuckerman, 1979, 1994). Before turning to work on sensation seeking, it is important to first clarify what we mean by the term felt gender compatibility.

1.1. Gender identity

One of the earliest and most well known typologies of gender identity (Bem, 1981) posits that people can be classified as masculine, feminine, or aschematic based on their standing on a variety of theoretically relevant personality traits. According to this theory, masculinity consists of socially desirable traits that are instrumental in nature, whereas femininity consists of traits of an expressive nature. While these categories may accurately describe certain aspects of people’s gender identity, others have argued that the complexity of an individual’s gender identity cannot be fully captured by a single underlying dimension. In response to this limitation, several researchers have suggested the need for a multidimensional framework to better conceptualize gender identity. One recent example is Egan and Perry’s (2001) theory of gender identity.

According to Egan and Perry (2001), gender identity is comprised of three basic elements: feelings of psychological compatibility with one’s gender, feelings of pressure from parents, peers, and self for conformity to gender stereotypes, and attitudes toward gender groups (i.e., the sentiment that one’s own sex is superior to the other). In line with past research (e.g., Beiley & Zucker, 1995; Berndt & Heller, 1986; Kohlberg, 1966; Rekers, 1985; Spence & Buckner, 1995), Egan and Perry assumed and showed that felt compatibility, assessed via their three components, is related to psychosocial adjustment. Based on their findings, Egan and Perry conclude that “children’s adjustment is optimized when they (a) are secure in their conceptions of themselves as typical members of their sex yet (b) feel free to explore cross-sex options when they so desire” (p. 459). Given these consequences, Egan and Perry recommend that researchers begin to identify factors that “. . . lead girls either to shun masculine attributes in order to garner peer approval or to cultivate the male-typed competencies that bring self-satisfaction but subject them to peer disapproval” (p. 460). As noted earlier, past research suggests

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