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The role of gender stereotypes in the social acceptability of the expression of intimacy

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the proposition that similar to the way that it is more acceptable for women than men to express traits that suggest vulnerability, such as loneliness or depression, it is also more acceptable for women to express emotional intimacy. Participants view an interaction between two men, two women, or a man and a woman, and evaluate the interpersonal attraction of the person expressing emotional intimacy. In Study 1, men gave the most negative evaluations to the man being intimate. In Study 2, thematic analysis of interview content suggests that participants hold gender stereotypes about intimacy and also that men frequently risk social rejection and may be perceived as gay when they engage in intimate expression, particularly when with other men. Overall, findings suggest that gender and related stereotypes have an observable role in the perceptions of an individual who is expressing intimacy.

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1. Introduction

There is a widely held belief that women and men differ in the ways they express emotion. Brody (1999) suggests that gender stereotypes promoting the non-expressive man and the emotionally expressive woman are commonly held in that men receive more negative evaluations than women when they express traits or emotions that suggest vulnerability. The expression of emotional intimacy may also be in this category. The term “intimacy” often brings to mind intimacy of a sexual nature, or intimacy experienced solely in the context of romantic relationships. Though sexual intimacy plays an important role in some relationships, emotional intimacy is more critical to relationship satisfaction than sexual intimacy (Levine, 1991). In fact, most research indicates that when participants are asked to define intimacy, they frequently say that intimacy is “more than sex,” or “does not have to involve sex”

(Gaia, 1997; Monsour, 1992). Therefore, for the present study, the term emotional intimacy does not necessarily involve sexual activity or even the possibility of sexual activity.

Studies indicate that there are gender-specific modes to express intimacy (Fischer, 1993; Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003; Kring & Gordon, 1998; Jussim, Milbourn, & Nelson, 1991) and that deviations from these stereotypes may result in negative judgments of both men and women (Deutsch, LeBaron, & Fryer, 1987). Williams (1985) suggests that men may be homophobic and fearful of appearing weak if they express emotions that may make them appear vulnerable. Further evidence for this is studies assessing self-disclosure in conversations in which men are found more likely to share victories and achievements, rather than failures and fears. Women, however, report being comfortable disclosing worries and information that may make them appear vulnerable (Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Peplau, 1983). Women also report interpersonal interactions characterized by a deeper level of intimacy than men (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988; Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Wright, 1982). Men often

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disclose less on what are considered topics emphasizing personal concerns, whereas women disclose less on topics related to assertiveness (Derlega, Durham, Gockel, & Sholis, 1981). Evolutionary psychologists also agree that courting rituals in which males compete for fertile females are consistent with men's desire to avoid displays of vulnerability (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Buss, 1995).

Timmers, Fischer, and Manstead (1998) categorize anger, contempt, and disgust as powerful emotions because they can be disruptive in social interactions, whereas sadness and fear are considered less powerful because they are less disruptive and often promote withdrawal from the group. Studies report that men tend to express the more powerful emotions and women are more likely and expected to express those categorized as less powerful (sadness, fear; Hess et al., 2000). Furthermore, it is more socially acceptable for men than women to express anger (Brody & Hall, 2000). In such cases, men may be more comfortable expressing powerful emotions because they are less likely to suggest vulnerability when compared to the less powerful emotions. Cross-cultural research confirms these findings (Safdar et al., 2009). Loneliness and depression are traits that also may suggest vulnerability (Beck & Young, 1978; Borys & Perlman, 1985; Lau & Gruen, 1992). The present study explores the proposition that similar to the way that it is more socially acceptable for women to express traits or emotions that suggest vulnerability, such as loneliness, depression, fear, and sadness, it is also more acceptable for women to openly express emotional intimacy, when compared to men.

Understanding the gender dynamics of intimacy is particularly important considering the benefits of social interaction and the experience of emotional intimacy. In fact, research indicates that the experience of intimacy within interpersonal relationships contributes greatly to physical and psychological health (Diener, 1984; Prager, 1995), relationship satisfaction, and successful coping with stress and crisis (Coyle & Smith, 1991; Evans, Pellizzari, Culbert, & Metzen, 1993; Lang, Gottlieb, & Amsel, 1996; Lepore, 1992; Miller & Lefcourt, 1983; Waltz, 1986). Not only does emotional intimacy protect individuals from the adverse psychological effects of crisis, there is a link between a lack of intimate relationships and reports of other psychological symptomatology, such as depression (Patton & Waring, 1984; Petersen et al., 1993; Vernberg, 1990) and loneliness (Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983). Other studies provide further evidence of a connection between emotional intimacy and psychological health (Brown, Bhrolcháin, & Harris, 1975; McAdams & Vaillant, 1982; Sheffield, Carey, Patenaude, & Lambert, 1995). If emotional intimacy is a critical feature of healthy interpersonal relationships, then the consequences of women and men experiencing different degrees of intimacy in their relationships must be considered, including the extent to which men and women suffer from physical and psychological ailments, successfully cope with stress, and recover from crisis. For example, there is evidence that though both men and women experience similar initial physiological responses to stressors, women are more likely than men to cope by moving from "fight-or-flight" to "tend-and-befriend," which leads to reliance on social support,

a valuable coping strategy (Taylor et al., 2000). Furthermore, women tend to cope better with the loss of a spouse when compared to men (Stroebe, 2001). Interpersonal relationship issues also may arise due to gender stereotypes associated with the expression of intimacy.

As mentioned, the idea that gender stereotypes may influence the expression of emotional intimacy or traits that suggest vulnerability is not new. Beck and Young (1978) reveal that college students report feeling more sympathetic toward women than men whom they believed to be suffering from depression. Other studies show that participants are more likely to reject depressed men than women (Beck & Young, 1978; Hammen & Peters, 1978). This fear of social rejection can also help explain why men are less likely than women to seek professional help for mental distress (Hammen & Padesky, 1977).

Studies of loneliness also offer evidence that men may be inhibited in the expression of intimate feelings because it is socially unacceptable. In a meta-analysis on the loneliness research, Borys and Perlman (1985) investigate why women score significantly higher on loneliness than do men when participants respond to direct questions about loneliness, such as "Are you a lonely person?". However, on less obvious assessments such as the UCLA Loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980), where items focus on the quality of relationships rather than labeling oneself lonely, gender differences are rarely found. When differences are significant on these measures, it is men who yield higher scores on loneliness than women.

To address the contradiction, Borys and Perlman (1985) hypothesize that it is social expectations, or gender stereotypes, that may keep men from overtly reporting feelings of loneliness, similar to research concerning depression. Based on the prototype of the lonely person developed by Horowitz, French, and Anderson (1982), Borys and Perlman create two profiles, both identical except for the name of the lonely person. In one profile, the name is female; in the other it is male. To assess the degree to which participants regarded each lonely person as acceptable or unacceptable, they respond to eight questions following each profile. Items include questions such as "How well do you think X would function as... a close friend, as a co-worker, as a romantic partner," etc. As expected, both men and women are more accepting of the lonely female target than the lonely male target. Borys and Perlman conclude that, indeed, participants view lonely men more negatively than they do lonely women. Therefore, if men are likely to be socially rejected when they express loneliness, then they may hesitate to openly identify themselves as lonely.

Similarly, research by Lau and Gruen (1992) examine the reactions of lonely people toward other lonely individuals. In this study, Lau and Gruen assess social acceptability using an instrument revised from an Attribute Measure first developed by Monge (1973). The newer measure examines a broader array of attributes (psychological adjustment, sociability/congeniality, achievement/competence, and interpersonal attraction) than the eight questions used by Borys and Perlman (1985). The Lau and Gruen study indicates significant differences for target gender, where participants judge lonely men as less sociable than non-lonely male targets, but participants' judgments of the

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