

'Macho men' skewing pain studies

November 16 2017



Credit: University of Reading

Hyper masculine men, who exhibit traits such as competitiveness and aggressiveness, may be more likely to take part in pain research – and it could be skewing our understanding of how women and men experience pain differently.

The research published in the *Journal of Pain* today (Wednesday 8 November) looked at whether identification with traditional [gender roles](#) influences the likelihood of participating in a [pain](#) study. The team from the University of Reading and Federal University of Rio de Janeiro found that men with traditionally male gender traits such as competitiveness and aggression were significantly more likely to sign up as participants for studies examining their pain responses.

Dr Tim Salomons, from the School of Psychology at the University of

Reading, said:

"I've always wondered what kind of people sign up for studies where they'll experience pain. We were especially interested in gender identification, as studies show that certain types of men might do unpleasant or risky things to test themselves and show others how "manly" they are.

"Maybe it isn't all that surprising that hyper-masculine men sign up for pain studies at a higher rate, but it's quite important in terms of understanding how they behave in those studies."

The team recruited 137 student volunteers to answer questions about their biological sex and gender identification, and then say whether they were willing to participate in a pain study. The results revealed that while there was little difference between men and women in participating, there was a significant correlation between [masculine traits](#) and participation, and the study indicated that the more aggressive and competitive a man, the more likely he is to agree to participate in pain studies.

Dr Salomons says the discovery not only suggests that pain studies may not accurately reflect population demographics, but may also alter our interpretation of observed differences between men and women:

"Contrary to the popular belief that women can endure more pain, research consistently shows that men have higher pain thresholds. Our paper suggests that this effect might be inflated by recruitment and reporting biases. Previous studies link [gender identification](#) to pain threshold, so if we're recruiting more 'macho men', it stands to reason that men will appear more tolerant. We also know that men report less pain if the experimenter is a woman, suggesting they might report less pain to appear manly."

"It certainly opens up questions about how perceived gender roles affect what we observe in studies – and what influence social upbringing and internal attitudes towards [gender](#) roles would have for [pain management](#)."

More information: L. Mattos Feijó et al. Sex-Specific Effects of Gender Identification on Pain Study Recruitment, *The Journal of Pain* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jpain.2017.09.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpain.2017.09.009)

Provided by University of Reading

Citation: 'Macho men' skewing pain studies (2017, November 16) retrieved 31 March 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-macho-men-skewing-pain.html>

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