

Manning up: Men may overcompensate when their masculinity is threatened

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

From the old Charles Atlas ads showing a scrawny male having sand kicked in his face to sitcom clichés of henpecked husbands, men have long faced pressure to live up to ideals of masculinity.

Societal norms dictating that [men](#) should be masculine are powerful. And new University of Washington research finds that men who believe they fall short of those ideals might be prompted to reassert their masculinity in small but significant ways.

Published last week in *Social Psychology*, the research sought to understand how men respond when their masculinity is threatened, and looked at two specific strategies they might employ: playing up their manliness and rejecting feminine preferences.

The study found that male college students who were given falsely low results on a handgrip strength test exaggerated their height by three-quarters of an inch on average, reported having more romantic relationships, claimed to be more aggressive and athletic, and showed less interest

in stereotypically feminine consumer products.

By contrast, men who received average score results, and whose masculinity was therefore not threatened, did not exaggerate those characteristics. The findings, researchers say, underscore the pressure men feel to live up to gender stereotypes and the ways in which they might reinstate a threatened masculinity.

'We know that being seen as masculine is very important for a lot of men,' said lead author Sapna Cheryan, a UW associate professor of psychology. 'We discovered that the things that men were using to assert their masculinity were the very things that are used as signals of identity.'

The research involved male students at Stanford University, where Cheryan received her doctorate in psychology. The students were told they were participating in research on how exertion impacts decision-making and were asked to squeeze a handheld device with each hand.

Researchers marked their scores on sheets that showed bogus bell curves representing male and female results, with the female curve clearly lower than the male one. Participants were scored either in the middle of the female or the male curve, suggesting that their grip was either weak or average.

They were then asked to fill out a questionnaire asking about their height, number of previous relationships, various personality traits and their interest in products that skewed male or female, along with 'distracter questions' about things like college major that were intended to allay potential suspicion about the study.

Cheryan said the consistent exaggeration about height among the group who thought they scored lower was particularly surprising.

'Height is something you think would be fixed, but how tall you say you are is malleable, at least for men,' she said.

Though the study focused exclusively on men, Cheryan noted that women also feel pressure to live up to gender ideals of femininity, such as being people-focused and nurturing. If women believe they are falling short of those expectations, Cheryan said, they might make choices with potentially negative consequences to demonstrate that they fit gender norms—for example, avoiding classes in traditionally male fields such as science and technology.

Cheryan got the idea for the experiments from a men's fitness magazine she was reading while working out at the gym several years ago. The magazine had a feature that asked men on the street how much they could bench press and then brought them into a gym to put their statements to the test.

Most couldn't bench what they claimed they could, and that got Cheryan thinking: What would those men do, she wondered, now that their masculinity was threatened? Would they acknowledge that they weren't as strong as they perhaps thought? Try to bolster their manliness in response?

So Cheryan devised the handgrip experiment and a second one that required a male group of students to take a computer-based masculinity test with multiple-choice questions about consumer preferences and personal attributes.

In the second experiment, the participants were told the median score on the test was 72 out of 100, with 100 being 'completely masculine,' and were randomly given a score of 26 or 73. They were then asked about a range of products they could receive as compensation. As with the handgrip experiment, the participants who thought they scored lower were less interested in more feminine consumer products.

'This research shows that men are under very strong prescriptive norms to be a certain way, and they work hard to correct the image they project when their masculinity is under threat,' said co-

author Benoît Monin, a professor of organizational behavior and psychology at Stanford University

The findings might seem amusing, but other studies have found that men compensate for a lack of masculinity in ways that aren't as innocuous. Men with baby faces, for example, were more likely to have assertive and hostile personalities and commit crimes than their more chiseled counterparts. Men who were told they scored low on masculinity tests were more likely to act aggressively, harass women and belittle other men.

Additionally, unemployed men were [more likely](#) to instigate violence against women, and men who were not their household's primary breadwinner [were less](#) willing to share in housework duties.

Identifying the various strategies men use when their masculinity is threatened, Cheryan said, can help with understanding male behavior in real-life situations.

'Men have a lot of power in our society, and what this study shows is that some decisions can be influenced by how they're feeling about their [masculinity](#) in the moment,' she said.

Other co-authors are Zach Katagiri and Jessica Schwartz Cameron of Stanford University.

More information: *Social Psychology*, econtent.hogrefe.com/doi/abs/10.1026/0022-006X.a000239

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