

Researchers threaten guys' masculinity, then watch them compensate with lies

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Pity the male of the species. It's so easy to threaten his masculinity, then watch him try to compensate by simply lying about himself.

"Manning Up" is a recent research paper headed by Sapna Cheryan, a University of Washington associate professor in psychology.

It begins in a rather unusual manner for an academic study-by quoting from Johnny Cash's 1969 hit, "A Boy Named Sue." The one that goes, "Some gal would giggle and I'd get red ... "

Then the study catalogs the reactions from guys the researchers duped into feeling [masculinity](#)-impaired through phony results from grip and personality tests.

The sampling was a bunch of college undergrads recruited at a dorm in exchange for \$3 gift cards.

The students:

Lie about their height. Lie about their number of sexual partners. Lie about how handy they are. Lie about their athleticism.

For example: The "non-threatened" undergrad group said in follow-up questions that they had had an average 1.76 sexual relationships in their lives.

The "threatened" ones said they had had an average 3.12 encounters. That's a 77 percent increase.

The study was a bit more diplomatic, not using "lie" but "exaggerating."

The study also concluded that guys who feel masculinity-impaired also distance themselves from what they perceive as girl stuff.

Go to a basketball game? Yes. Go to a body spa? No way.

Movie and popcorn, yes. Watching a dance ensemble? Ha.

Home Depot, yes. Banana Republic? Hmmm, no thanks.

"Guys don't relate to going shopping for clothes," says Cheryan.

And the study showed something else: how gullible we all can be, if a test looks scientific enough.

The undergrads, all from Stanford University, which is where Cheryan was when the research was done, fell for a couple phony tests, with phony results, that made them believe their masculinity was in question.

In one test, the 36 guys were told the strength of their grip would be measured.

They squeezed on something called a Jamar Handgrip Dynamometer, which had a meter attached, kind of like on a bike pump.

"We couldn't even read it," Cheryan says about the meter. It didn't matter. It just had to look science-y.

Then the guys were shown phony results.

One group was told they scored right in the middle for a masculine score.

But another group was shown a bogus bell curve that placed their grip strength similar to that of a woman.

Let that sink in, 20-year-old male undergrad.

In the other test, guys were given multiple-choice questions to supposedly measure their "masculinity compared to those of other men."

For example, they were asked whether they'd prefer to drive a Honda Civic, Ford Taurus, Toyota Camry or Volvo C70.

The questions were designed "so that no answer was obviously masculine," according to the paper.

One group of guys was told they had scored 73, and that the median score for a guy was 72. These guys didn't exaggerate later.

And then there was the other group, who were told they had scored ... 26.

No, no, no, 26! What?

And so the lying began from the masculinity-threatened guys.

Cheryan points out that everyone knows their height - from a driver's license or filling out various forms. The researchers had the actual height measurements for the subjects.

The threatened guys "exaggerated their height by three-quarters of an inch," Cheryan said. Not so with the non-threatened guys.

By the way, government figures show the average American male in his 20s is 5 feet 9.4 inches tall. Six feet and over puts you in the top 20 percentile.

The threatened guys also exaggerated their handiness by 16 percent when asked questions such as, "How handy are you with tools?"

They also exaggerated their athleticism and their aggressiveness by some 25 percent.

But you women who log onto OK Cupid are familiar with all that.

Cheryan said she does feel a bit sorry for the male species.

As other researchers have put it about masculinity, she says, "Hard won, easily lost."

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