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Masculine Gender Role Stress and Intimate Abuse: Effects of Gender Relevance of Conflict Situations on Men's Attributions and Affective Responses

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This article proposes an approach to understanding men's abuse of their intimate partners. The authors suggest that the concept of masculine gender role stress (MGRS) might be useful in identifying men who are predisposed to become abusive with their intimate partners. College men who scored either high or low on an MGRS scale were assessed, and their attributions, affect, and conflict resolution behavior toward their intimate female partners were examined. Participants were presented with masculine-gender-relevant and masculine-gender-irrelevant vignettes involving disputes with their intimate female partners. Results indicated that men high in MGRS attributed greater negative intent; expressed more irritation, anger, and jealousy; and endorsed aggressive responding more often than did men low in MGRS. Implications of MGRS and masculine relevance of conflicts for understanding male abusive behavior are discussed.

Male abusiveness and violence against women have often been attributed to men's adherence to their understanding of culturally defined masculinity (Brooks & Silverstein, 1995; Doyle, 1989). According to this reasoning, men are socialized to be competitive and to develop power and control strategies that encourage expressions of anger and curtail expressions of vulnerability (Doyle, 1989; Eisler & Blalock, 1991). Studies have suggested that strong identification with these stereotyped masculine gender roles may be responsible, in part, for men's violence against women in their intimate relationships (for reviews, see Smith, 1990; Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). Finn (1986) reported that college men who held traditional masculine attitudes about the superior status and authority of men were more likely to endorse marital violence by husbands against their wives. In addition, men who strongly endorsed traditional masculine roles were more likely to physically abuse their female dating partners (Bernard, Bernard, & Bernard, 1985).

Mason and Blankenship (1987) and Prince and Arias (1984) suggested that abuse might result from some men's motivation to maintain power and control in their intimate relationships. Mason and Blankenship reported that a strong need for power in men was reliably associated with the use of physical abuse to resolve conflict with their intimate partners. Prince and Arias reported that abusive men's beliefs about being dominant and their ability to control the outcome of environmental events were reliably related to their use of violence against their partners.

Dutton and Browning (1988) pointed out that losing power or control to a woman may be highly aversive to some men. Abusive behavior is then produced to terminate the aversive situation for these men and restore their sense of power and control. Because power and control partly define the masculine gender role, an implication of Dutton and Browning (1988) may be that the violent behavior of abusive men may be more likely to occur in specific situations a man considers relevant to his construal of the masculine gender role. Consistent with Dutton and Browning's view, Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) reported that, in situations evoking feelings of jealousy or rejection, violent husbands attributed more negative intentions to their wife's behavior than did distressed–nonviolent or nondistressed–nonviolent husbands.

The results of Dutton and Browning (1988) and Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) suggest that men's abusiveness may arise in specific situations that threaten their conceptualization of how they should enact the masculine gender role. If so, what may be needed is a more detailed understanding of situations that are likely to produce threats to a man's sense of his masculinity and a method of identifying men who are especially vulnerable to such threats.

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Eisler and his colleagues (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988) developed a self-report instrument, the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale, to measure men's cognitive appraisals of specific situations that would be threatening or stressful to them. Situations that men evaluated as stressful were those perceived as highly relevant to their construal of masculine roles based on independence, power, and control. For example, male role norms (Eisler, 1995; Levant, Wu, & Fischer, 1996) specify that men are expected to perform well and demonstrate mastery in athletics, particularly in comparison with women. When a man loses to a woman in an athletic competition, he may experience more stress than if he lost to a man because athletic competition is a masculine-gender-relevant context in which men should prevail over women. Men high in masculine gender role stress (MGRS) also showed greater increases in blood pressure on masculine-gender-relevant tasks that threatened their physical endurance and ability to withstand pain than did men low in MGRS (Lash, Eisler, & Schulman, 1990).

If the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale identifies men who are susceptible to threat in situations relevant to their masculine gender role, then, when the masculine-relevant situation includes threat from their intimate partners, men high in MGRS will react with more negative attributions and affect toward their intimate partner than they will in situations that are irrelevant to their masculine gender role. The present study sought to assess men high and low in MGRS on negative attributions, negative affect, and conflict resolution strategies in response to conflict with their intimate female partners in masculine-gender-relevant and masculine-gender-irrelevant situations. It was hypothesized that masculine gender relevance of the situation and level of MGRS would reliably increase negative attributions and negative affect. More important, relative to men low in MGRS, men high in MGRS were expected to make more negative attributions and negative affective responses to female behavior in situations relevant to a man's construal of his masculine gender role than in situations irrelevant to his gender role.

Method

Participants

The participants ($N = 86$) composing the high and low MGRS groups were selected from a screening of 131 male undergraduates from the participant pool of students in psychology courses at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. The high and low MGRS groups consisted of participants in the screening session whose MGRS scores were in the upper and lower quartiles, respectively. Mean Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale scores were 125.2 for the high group ($n = 43$) and 67.5 for the low group ($n = 43$), $t(84) = 18.39$, $p < .001$. The cutoff for the low MGRS group was 86 or below, and the cutoff for the high MGRS group was 108 or above.

Participants were required to be involved in a heterosexual relationship for a minimum of 3 months either currently or within the preceding year. Participation was voluntary and was compensated with course credit. Participants' mean age was 19.4 years. According to self-report, 46% of the participants were freshmen, 27% were sophomores, 15% were juniors, and 12% were seniors. Forty-one percent reported that they were currently involved in a heterosexual relationship.

Design and Procedure

The experiment involved a 2×2 mixed factorial design; the between-subjects variable was MGRS group (high vs. low), and the within-subject variable was type of situation (masculine gender relevant vs. masculine gender irrelevant). Participants signed an informed-consent form and listened to six audiotaped vignettes that depicted conflicts between male and female dating partners. Participants were specifically instructed to imagine that they and their girlfriend were the persons portrayed in each situation. After each vignette, participants responded to questions about their attributions and affective responses regarding their girlfriend's behavior and how they would resolve the conflict with her. The duration of each vignette was approximately 35 s, and the total time required for listening to the six vignettes and responding to the questions for each was approximately 25 min. Instructions were standardized, and seating was arranged to minimize conversation and distraction among participants. After providing responses to questions on all six vignettes, participants completed the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale and a demographics questionnaire.

Vignettes

Six audiotaped vignettes of hypothetical interactions between dating partners were adapted from Holtzworth-Munroe and Hutchinson (1993) and Moore, Eisler, and Franchina (in press). In all six of the conflict situations, the female partner presented some challenge to the man's authority. In three of the six situations, she challenged him about a masculine-relevant

activity; in the other three, her challenge was not related to the masculine role.

The three vignettes that depicted conflict in masculine-relevant situations were as follows: (a) The man and his date are at a party. He sees her flirting with another man whom he doesn't know. When he approaches them she tells him she can talk with whomever she pleases. (b) The man is waiting at a restaurant for his date to arrive. She calls to tell him she will not meet him for dinner as he expected. He tells her to meet him anyway. She tells him she is not his slave and will not be coming. (c) The man is at his girlfriend's apartment alone. He answers her phone and another man asks for her and then hangs up. When he queries her about the caller, she tells him it is none of his business.

The following three vignettes depicted conflict in masculine-irrelevant situations: (a) The man is studying with his girlfriend at her apartment when they realize that they have a misunderstanding about what their plans are for their date Saturday night. He tells her it's not important to him what they do and she berates him for being indifferent to her plans. (b) The man's girlfriend arrives at their apartment emotionally distraught over her problems at school. He tells her to calm down and that she's overreacting. She screams at him to go away and that he doesn't understand her. (c) The couple receives a phone call that the man's parents are planning to visit them at his apartment this weekend. His girlfriend says his place needs cleaning before they arrive. The man tells her his place is plenty clean enough. She insists that he help her clean up the place so she won't be embarrassed by his messiness.

As a means of evaluating the masculine gender relevance of each vignette, the vignettes were presented to an independent sample ($N = 68$) of college men ($n = 22$) and women ($n = 46$) who were asked to rate how stressful and anger provoking each vignette was for the man and woman depicted in the situations. The rationale for this rating strategy was that, in situations relevant to men's construal of their masculine role, judges would rate the conflict as more stressful and anger provoking for the man than for the woman than they would in gender-irrelevant situations. Conversely, in situations that are masculine gender irrelevant, judges should rate the conflict as less stressful for the man than for the woman. Responses ranged from 1 (not stressful/anger provoking for the man/woman) to 7 (very stressful/anger provoking for the man/woman).

The three vignettes selected as masculine gender relevant were those that both male and female judges rated as highest on anger and stress for the man. For these vignettes, mean ratings of stress and anger for the man were 5.78 and 5.94 according to male raters and 5.97 and 6.18 according to female raters, respectively. The three vignettes selected as masculine gender irrelevant were those that judges rated as lowest on anger and stress for the man. For these vignettes, mean ratings of stress and anger for the man were 3.75 and 2.82 according to male raters and 3.88 and 3.63 according to female raters, respectively. For the masculine-gender-irrelevant vignettes, raters scored the situations as less stressful for the man than for the woman. Two-tailed t-test comparisons between masculine-gender-relevant and masculine-gender-irrelevant vignettes yielded reliable differences for ratings of stress and anger: male raters, $ts(21) = 9.08$ and 17.72, respectively, $p < .001$, and female raters, $ts(45) = 15.12$ and 17.71, respectively, $p < .001$.

Measures

Gender role stress. The Masculine Gender Role Stress (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987) Scale is a 40-item instrument that measures the degree to which men cognitively appraise how stressful or threatening specific situations are for them. Responses to each item are made on a 6-point scale (0 = *not at all stressful/threatening*, 5 = *extremely stressful/threatening*). Responses to items are summed, for a total possible score of 200. The higher the score, the more the man appraises situations as stressful or threatening. Exemplar items are "being outperformed at work by a woman," "appearing less athletic than a friend," and "not making enough money." The scale has sufficient 2-week test–retest reliability ($r = .93$) and good internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$; Eisler et al., 1988). Construct validity has also been supported (Eisler, 1995).

Attributions questionnaire. The Negative Intentions Questionnaire (NIQ; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993) is a five-item inventory that assesses specific attributions of negative intent regarding the girlfriend's behavior in the vignettes (e.g., she was trying to make me angry or she was trying to put me down). Responses are made on a 6-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). Responses to items were summed to provide an index of negative intent. Higher scores indicated more negative appraisals of the girlfriend's behavior. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the NIQ in the present study was .89.

Negative affective questions. These questions assessed the participant's feelings of irritation, anger, and jealousy in response to the situations with his girlfriend. The items were "I would feel jealous in this situation," "I would feel irritated in this situation," and "I would feel angry in this situation." Responses were made on a 6-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree*

(1) to *strongly agree* (6). For each item, higher scores indicated a greater amount of reported negative affect.

Conflict resolution questions. Three questions were adapted from the Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, 1979), an instrument measuring the frequency of behavioral strategies used to resolve conflict in male–female interactions. Items were selected from the Reasoning subscale ("I would resolve this conflict through discussion"), the Verbal Aggression subscale ("I would swear at my partner"), and the Violence subscale ("I would shove my partner"). Again, responses were made on a 6-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). The higher the score, the greater the frequency of the behavioral strategy.

Results

Analyses of demographic data indicated no reliable differences between the high and low MGRS groups in regard to academic level, ethnicity, current dating–marital status, or length of longest relationship ($ps > .20$). Recency of dating did not reliably influence attributions, affect, or conflict resolution responses to partner behavior in masculine-gender-relevant or masculine-gender-irrelevant situations. The high MGRS group ($M = 19.05$ years) was reliably younger than the low MGRS group ($M = 19.98$ years), $t(84) = 2.20$, $p < .05$; this difference probably reflected sampling error and seems incidental to the results of this experiment.

Attributions of Negative Intent

Table 1 displays mean NIQ scores for the high and low MGRS groups for partner behavior in masculine-gender-relevant and masculine-gender-irrelevant situations. The high MGRS group attributed greater negative intent to partner behavior than did the low MGRS group, $F(1, 84) = 7.36$, $p < .05$. NIQ scores were reliably higher in masculine-gender-relevant than in masculine-gender-irrelevant situations, $F(1, 84) = 420.95$, $p < .001$. However, the difference between groups on the NIQ was greater in masculine-relevant than in masculine-irrelevant situations (MGRS × Situation), $F(1, 84) = 5.74$, $p < .05$. Results of two-tailed t-test comparisons for the interaction showed a reliable difference in NIQ scores between the groups for gender-relevant situations, $t(84) = 3.64$, $p < .01$, but not for gender-irrelevant situations, $t(84) = 1.20$, $p > .20$.

Table 1
Mean Negative Intentions Questionnaire Scores for High- and Low-MGRS Groups in Masculine-Gender-Relevant and Masculine-Gender-Irrelevant Situations

	MGRS			
	High		Low	
Situation	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Relevant	4.28	0.64	3.72	0.90
Irrelevant	2.45	0.71	2.27	0.69

Note. MGRS = masculine gender role stress.

Ratings of Negative Affect

Table 2 displays mean scores for the high and low MGRS groups on feelings of irritation, anger, and jealousy about the partner's behavior in masculine-gender-relevant and masculine-gender-irrelevant situations. The high MGRS group reported reliably more irritation, anger, and jealousy than did the low MGRS group, Fs(1, 84) = 17.42, 22.28, and 14.19, respectively, $p < .001$. Scores for irritation, anger, and jealousy were reliably higher for masculine-relevant than for masculine-irrelevant situations, Fs(1, 84) = 274.15, 254.39, and 710.40, respectively, $p < .001$. Results for irritation and jealousy measures also yielded reliable MGRS × Situation interactions, Fs(1, 84) = 4.59 and 5.42, respectively, $p < .05$. Two-tailed t-test comparisons revealed that irritation about the partner's behavior was reliably greater for the high than for the low MGRS group in both the masculine-gender-relevant situation, $t(84) = 3.06$, $p < .01$, and the masculine-gender-irrelevant situation, $t(84) = 3.87$, $p < .001$; however, the difference between group means was smaller in the masculine-relevant situation than in the masculine-irrelevant situation (0.40 vs. 0.82). The high MGRS group reported reliably greater jealousy than did the low MGRS group in gender-relevant and gender-irrelevant situations, two-tailed ts(84) = 3.70 and 2.16, $ps < .001$ and .05, respectively; the difference between group means was greater in the gender-relevant than in the gender-irrelevant situations (0.67 vs. 0.24).

Conflict Resolution Tactics

Table 3 displays mean scores for the high and low MGRS groups for the use of calm discussion, verbal aggression, and behavioral aggression in resolving conflict with the partner in masculine-gender-relevant and masculine-gender-irrelevant situations. An analysis of variance of the results for calm discussion yielded no reliable effects for any variable ($ps > .10$). Results for verbal and physical aggression showed that

Table 2
Mean Irritation, Anger, and Jealousy Scores for High- and Low-MGRS Groups in Masculine-Gender-Relevant and Masculine-Gender-Irrelevant Situations

	Irritation				Anger				Jealousy			
	High MGRS		Low MGRS		High MGRS		Low MGRS		High MGRS		Low MGRS	
Situation	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Relevant	5.66	0.59	5.26	0.63	5.50	0.68	4.87	0.92	4.01	0.84	3.34	0.83
Irrelevant	4.22	1.00	3.40	0.99	3.64	1.13	2.66	1.16	1.40	0.67	1.16	0.34

Note. MGRS = masculine gender role stress.

the high MGRS group endorsed these tactics reliably more than did the low MGRS group, $Fs(1, 84) = 3.90$ and 4.48, respectively, $p < .05$. The use of verbal and physical aggression to resolve conflict was reported reliably more in masculine-gender-relevant than in masculine-gender-irrelevant situations, $Fs(1, 84) = 104.13$ and 11.39, respectively, $p < .001$. There was no reliable MGRS × Situation interaction for verbal ($F < 1$) or physical, $F(1, 84) = 1.72$, $p > .10$, aggression measures.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that men high in MGRS differed from men low in MGRS on six of the seven dependent measures. For example, men high in MGRS reported more negative attributions and more negative affect in terms of irritation, jealousy, and anger than did men low in MGRS. Gender relevance of the situation also reliably influenced attributions and affect on six of seven measures. More negative attributions and negative affect were reported for the woman's behavior in gender-relevant than gender-irrelevant situations.

Our expectations of an interaction between MGRS and gender relevance of the situation were supported by the NIQ results and the results for the measure of jealousy. Men high in MGRS made reliably more negative attributions about the woman's behavior than did men low in MGRS in the masculine-gender-relevant situation but not in the masculine-gender-irrelevant situation. The Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale identifies men who are susceptible to being stressed or threatened in situations that involve subordination to women, performance inadequacy, or diminution of a man's exertion of power, control, or dominance. When a man who scores high on the scale appraises an interaction involving his female partner as negatively challenging his construal of how he should enact his masculine gender role, the resultant stress or threat is aversive. Because the female partner's actions are the source of this aversiveness for the man high in MGRS, he makes more negative attributions about her behavior and reacts with more negative affect than does the man low in MGRS.

Previous research by Dutton and Browning (1988) indicated that negative attributions about female behavior accompanied self-reports of greater anger in violent men than in nonviolent men. Because Eisler and Skidmore (1987) also found that men high in MGRS were likely to report relatively more anger than men low in MGRS, it seemed reasonable to expect that the former would report greater negative affect toward their female partners than would the latter. Our results did show that men high in MGRS reported reliably greater anger and irritation than did men low in MGRS in masculine-relevant and masculine-irrelevant situations. However, differences between

Table 3
Mean Scores for Use of Calm Discussion, Verbal Aggression, and Physical Aggression by High- and Low-MGRS Groups in Masculine-Gender-Relevant and Masculine-Gender-Irrelevant Situations

	Calm discussion				Verbal aggression				Physical aggression			
	High MGRS		Low MGRS		High MGRS		Low MGRS		High MGRS		Low MGRS	
Situation	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Relevant	4.60	1.23	4.97	1.13	2.99	1.48	2.64	1.48	1.50	1.09	1.17	0.54
Irrelevant	4.62	0.99	4.90	0.98	1.67	0.93	1.21	0.39	1.11	0.29	1.00	0.00

Note. MGRS = masculine gender role stress.

the groups were smaller in masculine-relevant than in masculine-irrelevant situations. The mean ratings of anger and irritation (5.66 and 5.50, respectively) for the high MGRS group were close to the maximum limit (6.0) of the rating scales.

The finding that MGRS groups differed reliably on measures of anger and irritation in gender-irrelevant situations suggests that the evaluation of the woman's behavior made by men high in MGRS influences their appraisal of the masculine relevance of the situation. The woman's behavior tended to challenge the man's dominance in both gender-relevant and gender-irrelevant situations. In gender-irrelevant situations, men high in MGRS may have appraised the woman's assertiveness as constituting a threat to their conceptualization of masculine power and control. That appraisal may have made the actions of the woman more pertinent to masculine gender ideology even in the low gender-relevant situations, resulting in greater expressions of anger and irritation from men high in MGRS than from men low in MGRS. These findings suggest the need to investigate the effects of the masculine gender relevance of the situation apart from the effects of the woman's behavior as a source of threat.

The present study also attempted to assess how men high and low in MGRS would respond behaviorally to a woman's behavior in gender-relevant and gender-irrelevant situations. The results indicated that men high in MGRS endorsed the use of verbal and physical aggression reliably more frequently than did men low in MGRS in both gender-relevant and gender-irrelevant situations. This finding is consistent with the idea that men who are susceptible to threat in situations that are masculine gender relevant will use behavioral strategies that they believe will maintain their dominance and control.

Traditional masculine values require men to behave aggressively when they are confronted with threats to their masculine ideology. Because men high in MGRS are more likely to appraise threat in situations that are masculine gender relevant than are men low in MGRS, they may be more likely to endorse more aggressive responses as well. However, although men high in MGRS endorsed the use of aggression more frequently than men low in MGRS, the means for frequency of aggressive responses were rather low in both groups (e.g., the means for physical violence did not exceed 1.50 on a 6-point scale). This finding could reflect the fact that male college students typically do not condone violence in these situations or that they were aware that violence in the context of intimate relationships is socially unacceptable. Assessment of the coping strategies used by men high in MGRS to resolve conflict with their intimate female partner will be a critical element of the present approach to understanding abusive behavior.

In summary, how some men conceptualize their masculine gender role predisposes them to appraise specific kinds of situations with a female partner as potentially threatening. Their responses to that threat may depend on the gender relevance of the situation and the nature of the woman's behavior in that situation. Predisposed men will view the threat as an aversive event and will respond in ways that maintain their construal of their masculine role. The present study has identified some dispositional and situational precursors to intimate abuse, and we conclude that negative attributions about the female partner, negative affect, and abusive behavior may be responses used to maintain a man's sense of his masculinity.

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