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The elusiveness of progressive masculinity: Gender differences in conceptualizations of nontraditional gender roles

ABSTRACT. Traditional masculinity has been thoroughly explored in psychological research, but its counterpart, progressive masculinity, has undergone relatively little scientific investigation. To determine whether this lack of attention to or understanding of progressive masculinity is mirrored more largely in mainstream culture, we examined how men and women conceptualize and experience gender roles in their everyday lives. Participants were randomly assigned to describe a time in which they had behaved either traditionally or progressively with regard to their gender. Over 80% of men and women in the traditional condition and women in the progressive condition provided condition-appropriate examples. However, men in the progressive condition only provided progressive examples 17% of the time, suggesting that many men may not have an understanding of progressive masculinity. Additional themes, implications, and directions for research on progressive masculinity are discussed.

KEYWORDS: masculinity, femininity, progressive, nontraditional, gender roles

Although psychological research on masculinity and femininity has been popular for decades, researchers have yet to explore a major piece of the gender ideology puzzle. Plenty of literature exists on both traditional and nontraditional notions of femininity, and ample research has been conducted on traditional forms of masculinity, but comparably little research exists on nontraditional, *progressive* notions of masculinity. Most masculinity research examines the effects of traditional masculine gender roles on men's mental health, with minimal examination of other forms of masculinity. As such, discussions of masculinity seem to bifurcate the masculinities into (a) traditional masculinity as defined in

contemporary culture, and (b) “other” forms of masculinity that in some ways deviate from traditional masculinity. In doing so, researchers have yet explicitly to label alternatives to traditional masculinity with which men who espouse nontraditional gender ideologies can identify.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to gather information about how men conceptualize progressive masculinity in their own lives, in order to promote a deeper understanding of gender and a clearer portrait of the many faces of masculinity. Because the lack of research on *progressive* masculinity stands in stark contrast to the abundant research on femininity and traditional masculinity, we begin by acknowledging the major themes from these literatures and then briefly review forms of masculinity other than traditional before presenting the construct of progressive masculinity.

Traditional femininity

Research on femininity and the study of women perhaps most clearly illuminate the lacuna in research on masculinity, as *both* traditional and progressive femininity have been the focus of extensive scientific investigation. Traditional feminine gender roles dictate that women should focus on relationships, be nice, physically attractive, thin, silent, nurturing of others, deferent to men, submissive, and domestic (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Gilbert & Scher, 1999; Mahalik, 2005). The development of psychological measures such as the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI; Mahalik et al., 2003) and the Adolescent Femininity Ideology Scale (AFIS; Tolman & Porche, 2000) has propelled research on traditional femininity. Via these and other instruments, research has connected women’s adherence to traditional feminine gender roles to psychological distress, such as eating disorders (Affleck, 1999; Mahalik et al., 2005) and body dissatisfaction (Cahill & Mussap, 2007; Tiggemann, 2006), as well as to inform various psychotherapies with women.

Nontraditional femininity

In addition to the plentiful research on traditional femininity, research on nontraditional forms of femininity also exists, perhaps because of the long-standing history and strength of the feminist move-

ment. Feminism, a form of nontraditional femininity, gives women the freedom to have careers, be single, childless, leaders, loud, reject traditional ideals of beauty (such as being thin and having long hair), and often explicitly reject traditional femininity. Researchers have created scales to measure feminist ideology, such as the Feminist Identity Scale (FIS; Rickard, 1987), the Feminist Identity Development Scale (FIDS; Bargad & Hyde, 1991), and the Liberal Feminist Attitude and Ideology Scale (LFAIS; Morgan, 1996). Research has connected the espousal of feminist principles to better mental health, such as lower levels of disordered eating (Sabik & Tylka, 2006). This type of research, in turn, has helped inform feminist psychotherapies, making the exploration of nontraditional femininity important in women's mental health care. Collectively, research on traditional and nontraditional femininity and women's mental health has helped scientists and clinicians understand the unique experiences of women and how the espousal of various femininities affects women's lives.

Traditional masculinity

In comparison to psychological research on traditional femininity, research on traditional masculinity is perhaps equally abundant. Traditional masculine gender roles indicate that men should avoid feminine behavior, strive for success and achievement, show no weakness, and seek adventure, even if violence is a necessary part of that adventure (David & Brannon, 1976; Levant & Richmond, 2007; Mahalik, 2003). Many psychological measures have been created and used to examine the effects of traditional masculine gender roles on men's mental health. These include the Brannon Masculinity Scale (BMS; Brannon & Juni, 1984), the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003), the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS; O'Neil et al., 1986), and the Male Role Norms Inventory (Levant & Fischer, 1998). Since the creation of these measures, men's adherence to traditional masculinity has been linked to anxiety, depression, homophobia, low self-esteem, marital issues, poor physical health, restricted emotionality, and substance abuse (O'Neil, 2008).

By contrast, psychological research on nontraditional masculinity is rare. This omission is evident in recent reviews of masculinity research. For example, neither Levant and Richmond's (2007) review of psycho-

logical research on masculine ideologies nor Wong, Steinfeldt, Speight, and Hickman's content analysis of *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* (2010) explicitly discusses nontraditional versions of masculinity, which is reflective of the lack of primary research on nontraditional masculinity in the psychological literature. However, several masculinities scholars *have* identified "other" forms of masculinity than traditional masculinity, and a brief review of which is provided below.

Other forms of masculinity

In response to the literature's heavy focus on the negative aspects of traditional masculinity, Kiselica, Englar-Carlson, Horne, and Fisher (2008) introduced the construct of *positive masculinity*, which highlights male strengths and the positive aspects of traditional masculinity, such as how traditional masculine gender roles can benefit men. Kiselica and Englar-Carlson (2010) discussed a formal framework emphasizing male strengths as the starting point for psychotherapy with boys and men. Similarly, Good and Hammer (2010) empirically examined the connections between positive psychology and traditional masculine gender roles and found that men who conformed to the traditional masculine gender role of risk-taking reported higher levels of personal courage and physical endurance. A related topic was also discussed by Davies, Shen-Miller, and Isaco (2010), who presented *possible masculinity*, which they defined as "an aspirational and future-oriented goal for men's identities and behaviors based on (a) what men want to be in the future, (b) what men require to meet their developmental needs, and (c) what we, as a community, need from men to foster community safety and health" (Davies, Shen-Miller & Isaco, 2010, p. 348). Although exploring positive and possible masculinity is vital to developing a comprehensive understanding of how traditional masculine gender roles affect individual's lives, both forms of masculinity remain based on traditional masculine norms.

A number of authors have also addressed men's reactions to *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pompper, 2010). For example, Wetherell and Edley (1999) discussed how men position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity. These authors conducted a series of interviews in which they asked men whether they classified themselves as "masculine men" and discovered the following three

themes: (a) men aligned themselves with conventional masculine ideals, (b) men separated themselves from conventional ideals, which they viewed as stereotypical, and saw themselves as normal or ordinary in comparison, and (c) men resisted hegemonic masculinity and saw themselves as unconventional. The authors, however, did not discuss nontraditional masculinity or other masculinities. This is another example of how the literature has continued to explore traditional forms of masculinity or even at times the rejection of it without providing a clear direction for men to move. Similarly, Allen (2007) explored *romantic masculinity* in relation to hegemonic masculinity, but found that romantic masculinity substantiated hegemonic masculinity, as men's romantic identities were grounded in active male sexuality and passive female sexuality.

Also, some authors have discussed forms of nontraditional masculinity that are specific to racial/ethnic groups. For example, Hammond and Mattis (2005) asked African American men what manhood meant to them and found themes in their responses that were mostly traditional, such as being a provider, but also some that were nontraditional, such as being able to express one's emotions freely. Focusing instead on Latinos, Arciniega and colleagues (2008) introduced the concept of *caballerismo*, an extension of the word *caballero* (a Spanish gentleman) as the positive nontraditional counterpart to the traditional *machismo*, in their discussion of Latino masculine ideologies, even developing the Traditional Machismo and Caballerismo Scale (TMCS; Arciniega et al., 2008). Research like this on nontraditional masculinity specific to racial/ethnic groups is critical to understanding various forms of masculinity, but it may have limitations in generalizing to other racial/ethnic groups.

From this brief review, one can conclude that researchers have begun to discuss forms of masculinity other than traditional masculinity, but are still in the infancy of forging clear or widely accepted terms to describe alternatives to traditional masculinity. We therefore now introduce the concept of *progressive masculinity* into the empirical literature. Though a comprehensive or final definition of progressive masculinity may be beyond the scope of this article, we offer the following working definition because one has not yet been offered: a form of masculinity emphasizing movement away from traditional male gender roles that are detrimental, restrictive, and oppressing of women, and instead toward volitional and egalitarian behaviors, values, and beliefs. Progressive masculinity is different from positive masculinity in that progres-

sive masculinity refers to aspects of nontraditional masculinity emphasizing gender-role freedom and principles of gender equality, whereas positive masculinity refers to the positive aspects and strengths of traditional masculinity.

The current study is a preliminary attempt to explore the nature of progressive masculinity. In order to determine whether the lack of attention to or understanding of progressive masculinity in the research literature is mirrored more largely within mainstream culture, this study examined how women and men conceptualize and experience traditional and progressive notions of gender in their everyday lives. Male and female participants were randomly assigned to describe a time in which they had behaved either progressively or traditionally with regard to their gender. This methodology allowed a comparison of progressive masculinity to the most closely related concepts: traditional masculinity, progressive femininity, and traditional femininity.

This study explores two research questions. *Research Question 1* asks how participants will respond when asked to recount a time in their lives when they acted *progressively* with regard to their gender. *Research Question 2* asks how participants will respond when asked to recount a time in their lives when they acted *traditionally* with regard to their gender.

Method

Participants

Participants were enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a large, southeastern, public university in the United States ($n = 324$), and participation satisfied a course requirement. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 50 years ($M = 18.63$, $SD = 2.02$). In this sample, 28.2% of participants identified as male and 71.8% as female. Of these participants, 65.9% identified as first year students, 19.2% as second year students, 9% as third year students, 4.6% as fourth year students, 0.3% as fifth year students, and 0.9% as sixth year students. Of these participants, 15.8% identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, and 84.2% as Not Hispanic or Latino/a. In addition, 73.1% of participants identified as White or European American, 12.1% as Black or African American, 9.3% as Asian, 0.3% as American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.6% as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and 4.6% as multi-racial.

Procedure

A description of the study was posted on the university's survey website used to inform students in introductory psychology courses about course requirement opportunities. Participants accessed the survey via an electronic link if they wished to participate for course credit. After accessing the survey website, participants viewed an informed-consent page and provided electronic voluntary consent to participate in the study. Participants then completed a short demographic form on which they indicated their age, school status, sex, and racial/ethnic identity.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two instructions, stratified by gender. Participants in the "real" condition were asked to reflect on a situation in which they felt as though they were "real" men or women, and participants in the "progressive" condition were asked to reflect on a situation in which they felt as though they were "progressive" men or women. All participants were asked to write briefly about the experience and reflect upon their own experience in order to ensure that they reported a direct, personal memory of an actual experience. Participants were not supplied with definitions of the terms "real" or "progressive" because doing so would have influenced their notions of what the terms meant, which was the primary construct under scrutiny in the study. This manipulation permitted an examination of how women and men conceptualized traditional and progressive notions of gender in their own lives. Participants then answered the following questions in order to allow an examination of the contextual influences on participants' descriptions of their "real" or "progressive" gender-related behaviors: "How meaningful was this event for you?" "How common do you think this type of experience is for other men/women?" "How many males were present at the time of this event?" "What was your relationship to them?" "How many females were present at the time of this event?" and "What was your relationship to them?"

As part of a larger study not addressed in this article, male participants then completed the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003) and the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS; O'Neil et al., 1986), and female participants then completed the Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI; Mahalik et al., 2005).

Data analysis

In order to determine whether participants were able to give appropriate examples from their lives according to the instructional condition to which they had been randomly assigned, participants' responses were coded as "Progressive" if their response to the prompt contained exclusively progressive or nontraditional notions of their gender, "Traditional" if their response contained exclusively real or traditional notions of their gender, "Progressive and Traditional" if their response contained both progressive/nontraditional and real/traditional notions of their gender, or "None" if their response contained neither progressive/nontraditional nor real/traditional notions of their gender. The study's first and second authors served as the judges and were of different genders, ages, and professional backgrounds. They coded the data independently and were blind to participant condition, though for appropriate coding, they had to know the sex of participants.

When coding male participants' responses as progressive, both raters were looking for responses that were nontraditional and/or were focused on gender equality and rejecting of restrictive notions of masculinity. In the coding scheme, progressive masculinity was identified by responses that did not conform to the items in O'Neil's GRCS (1986) and Mahalik's CMNI (2003) measures. For example, GRCS Item 7 is "Affection with other men makes me tense," so any participant response that discussed expressing physical or emotional affection for another other man (like kissing/hugging/telling a man you love him) and feeling good about it was considered progressive. Responses were coded as traditional that focused on the oppression of women (i.e. were sexist) or included traditional notions of masculinity as described in O'Neil's GRCS and Mahalik's CMNI.

When coding female participants' responses as progressive, both raters were looking for responses that were nontraditional and/or were focused on gender equality and rejecting of restrictive notions of femininity. In the coding scheme, progressive femininity was identified by responses that did not conform to the items in Mahalik's CFNI (2005). For example, CFNI Item 11 is "Having a romantic relationship is essential in life," so any participant response that discussed self-reliance or not needing a relationship partner to feel complete was considered progressive. Responses were coded as traditional that focused on the oppression of women (i.e. were sexist) or included traditional notions of femininity as described in Mahalik's CFNI.

The fact that the judges did not know whether participants were instructed to report a “progressive” or “real” gender experience eliminated an important source of confirmatory bias, as did the independence of their ratings. Initially, discrepancies between judges occurred in 50 of 324 cases (15%). Subsequent conversations between the judges resolved these 50 discrepancies successfully in every case. Twenty-one of 50 cases (42%) produced agreement with the original judgment of the first author, 17 of 50 (34%) resolved in agreement with the original judgment of the second author, and 12 of 50 (24%) resolved with both agreeing to a completely different analysis. In no cases did the judges fail to reach agreement.

Results

Research Question 1 asked how participants would respond when asked to recount a time in their lives when they had acted *progressively* with regard to their gender. Most of the male participants in the “progressive” instruction condition responded to the progressive prompt by recounting an experience that reflected *traditional* notions of masculinity. Only 17% of the male participants in the “progressive” condition provided responses that reflected progressive notions of masculinity, free of any references to traditional masculine gender roles (Figure 1). Instead, the majority (43%) of male participants responded to the “progressive” instruction by recounting a time in which they had acted *traditionally*.

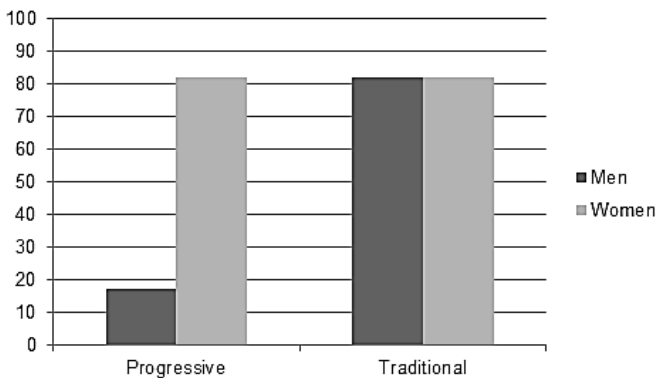


Figure 1: Percent of participants who provided a condition-appropriate response

For instance, a participant in the “progressive” condition responded to the prompt by recounting the following experience:

I was building a table in a group of three, in which I was happened to be grouped with two other females. For some reason, I felt as if my group members did not have the skills required to build a table out of plain woods and screws. [T]herefore, I took charge, and explained to them [how] to go about and finish the job.

This participant’s response is not only aligned with traditional masculine gender roles, as he portrays himself as dominant and in control of the situation, but it is also sexist since he “felt” his female group members “did not have the skills required” to complete the task. Another male participant responded to the “progressive” instruction with a similar experience:

In high school, I was on the lacrosse team. We were in a tie game with approximately thirty seconds left. One of my teammates checked the ball loose and pushed up the field. I was on attack and he gave me the pass. I beat the goalie one-on-one as time expired to win the game. As my team rushed the field and tackled me to the ground, it felt good knowing my teammate had the confidence in me to finish the game.

This experience also reflects traditional masculinity, as the participant depicts himself as the hero in a physical sport, in which his team beats another team.

Although the majority of male participants’ responses to the “progressive” instruction contained references to traditional masculinity, some male participants were able to recount experiences which reflected progressive notions of masculinity. For example, one participant recounted the following experience:

Everyone picked on this one obnoxious kid in high school. He was so obnoxious in fact, that he had hardly any friends, and was shunned the instant he tried to join in in anything. So I would go out of my way to tell people to shut up when talking bad about him, and would support him if people were being mean to him.

This response reflects a progressive notion of masculinity because the participant is acting in a supportive and caring way, and standing up against bullying. Another male participant similarly took a progressive approach by helping and nurturing a friend emotionally through a breakup:

A friend of mine recently broke up with her boyfriend and was having a tough time. She had noticed that he was hanging around another girl, who was a friend of hers, very frequently and was heartbroken when she found out that they had begun. I noticed how hard this was for her and was there to offer advice and answer any and all questions she had about what to do or say around her ex-boyfriend and more importantly her friend. We ended talking a lot and any time she was confused or frustrated, I was there to help. We have become very good friends because of this.

In comparison to male participants, 82.5% of female participants assigned to the “progressive” instruction condition recounted an experience that reflected a progressive notion of femininity, free of any references to traditional femininity. The results of a χ^2 analysis revealed this effect of participants’ gender on whether they were able to respond appropriately to the “progressive” condition as statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1, n = 324) = 51.94, p < .001$ (Figure 1). An example of a female participant’s response in the “progressive” condition recounted the following experience:

I told my family I plan on having a successful career before getting married, so I do not have to rely on some man financially.

In this example, the participant values financial independence from men and having her own professional career. Another female participant similarly provided an example involving the rejection of the traditional role of needing a relationship to feel complete or mature:

I don’t have to look back far. As of today I consider myself a “progressive” woman. I am single by choice. I am often flattered by various men but opt not to get involved in a relationship. This makes me progressive because I am being independent and making my own rules about this thing called femininity. I have reached a new level of maturation in my womanhood. At the club, I am no longer concerned about getting the most attention from the guys.

Research Question 2 asked how participants would respond when asked to recount a time in their lives when they had acted *traditionally* with regard to their gender. *Both* men and women exposed to the “real” instruction were able to recount experiences that reflected traditional gender roles 82% of the time (Figure 1). For example, a male participant exposed to the “real” man instruction condition recounted the following experience:

One time in which I felt as though I was a real man was when I got into a fight with a classmate. Up until the fight, we were actually really good friends. In the fight I punched him twice and blocked his attempt at a punch, and I felt as though I had proved myself in some way because I was always skinny for my age. At that moment, I knew that people would realize that I was not one to be messed with.

This response contains references to control, dominance, and violence, all of which are traditional masculine gender roles. Another male participant recounted a similar experience involving both playing football and physical aggression:

I won a physical fight when a bunch of my friends and this new kid I didn't know were playing football. The new guy pushed me when I asked to play, and I pushed him back. When he came at me again I hit him...again and again and again until he started bleeding. He went home crying.

On the other hand, a female participant in the "real" woman condition recounted the following experience:

I felt like a woman when I started living with my boyfriend this past summer, making breakfast for him every morning. I felt like a typical domestic housewife that knew she was responsible for caring for her spouse. I would wake up 20 minutes earlier than him, get ready for the day and start making breakfast while he got ready for class. By the time he was ready, I had breakfast set on the table, his keys on the counter and his backpack by the door. Many women would believe this task to be unnecessary, but I felt great knowing that I made his morning a little better than it normally would be. While he made the bed, I washed the dishes and waited for him by the door. At that moment, I felt like my gender was more apparent than ever. I had done every 'feminine' chore possible for him to make his life easier, and fortunately it was very much appreciated.

This response references domesticity, nurturance, and deference to men, all of which are traditional feminine gender roles. Another woman in the traditional condition recounted the following experience involving the traditional female gender role of cooking:

I do enjoy cooking and baking for special people in my life, which does make me feel like a woman. Preparing a holiday meal others can enjoy is satisfying and using recipes from my grandmother and mother is also a great feeling because it is as though you are keeping the family unit together, which is also a womanly duty to me.

Exploratory analyses

In addition to answering the original research questions, participants' responses yielded some additional themes which emerged as a result of *post-hoc* exploratory analyses attempting further to explore men's and women's gender-role experiences. For example, 31% of female participants responded to the "real" woman prompt by recounting an experience in which the presence of secondary sex characteristics, such as menstruation or breast development, made them feel as if they were "real" women. For example, a female participant in the "real" woman condition recounted the following experience:

I felt like I became a "real" woman when I got my first menstrual period. I feel as though this makes you a woman because only women experience this cycle. It is the one thing that distinguishes you from a male and it shows that you are maturing into a woman.

Similarly, another participant wrote:

I would say an experience that made my gender more apparent to me personally was when I went bra shopping for the first time. Up until that point, I had only felt like a girl. After I went bra shopping, I realized that I was growing up into a young woman.

However, *none* of the male participants referenced secondary sex characteristics in response to the "real" man prompt.

Another trend that emerged from participants' responses was reference to competition. Male participants frequently (41%) referenced competition and when they did, *exclusively* referenced competition with other males. On the other hand, 58% of female participants referenced competition, of which 91% was with males and 7% was with females. For example, a female participant in the "progressive" condition referenced competition with other males in the following response:

One experience I can recall vividly in which I felt empowered as a woman was during an intense game of Halo 2. Although a male dominated activity, I was able to beat all the other boys in the video game. At that moment, I knew that I had dismantled a very common stereotype.

The results of a χ^2 analysis revealed a significant association between participant gender and whether or not participants referenced competition in response to the prompt $\chi^2 (1, n = 324) = 4.94, p = .026$.

Discussion

In this study, gender differences emerged from the qualitative analyses of participants' responses to gender-role instructions. Many male participants did not respond to the "progressive" man instruction in a way that reflected progressive notions of masculinity, some female participants responded to the "real" woman instruction by reporting the development of secondary sex characteristics, and more than half of all female participants exposed to the "progressive" woman instruction referenced competition with males.

These findings suggested several important differences between men's and women's understandings of progressive and traditional gender roles. Men in the progressive masculinity condition were largely unable to recount experiences in their lives that made them feel as though they were "progressive" men. Conversely, women *were* able to respond appropriately to the "progressive" instruction, suggesting they may have had existing definitions or guidelines of what it means to be a progressive woman when they began responding to the prompt. The gender differences in participants' abilities to respond accurately to the prompt may be explained in part by the lack of working definitions of progressive masculinity in mainstream society.

Men are commonly exposed to traditional notions of masculinity, such as the requirement to be tough or unemotional, but may rarely be exposed to progressive notions, such as the ability to be emotional or nurturing. Conversely, women receive exposure to both traditional and nontraditional forms of femininity in modern culture, such as the plausibility of being either a homemaker or a career-woman. This is not to say that women who do not conform to traditional notions of femininity do not experience marginalization or discrimination in the United States, because sexism is still prevalent. Additionally, the presence of two different feminine ideologies can create a double-bind for women, in which some women feel the need to act both progressively and traditionally in order to gain social acceptance. However, the feminist movement may provide a sense of support for women who espouse a nontraditional femininity, as feminism actively promotes progressive femininity. Though there has been acknowledgement in the literature of a male-identity development process (O'Neil & Egan, 1992) and even of a collective male identity (Wade & Gelso, 1998), comparable support to what feminism provides for women

is lacking for men, though a progressive masculinity movement may help fill the gap.

Differences in society's support for various definitions of masculinity and femininity may stem from the differences in the histories of the feminist movement and the men and masculinity movement. Feminist theory and action has gained momentum since the beginning of the women's suffrage movement in the mid-1840s (Freedman, 2007), whereas the men and masculinity movement did not gain momentum until the mid-1970s (Levant, 1996). Likewise, scholars have been studying the feminist movement and thinking about progressive notions of femininity far longer, as well. For example, psychological research on feminism has been popular since the 1970s. Journals, such as *Psychology of Women Quarterly* and *Feminism and Psychology*, have been publishing articles specifically focused on women's mental health and issues for more than 35 years. Division 35 of the American Psychological Association, the Society for Psychology of Women, was established in 1975 (Division 35, 2010). Conversely, psychological research on men and masculinity has only been popular since the early 1990s (Whorley & Addis, 2006). Journals devoted to men and masculinity research, such as *Men and Masculinities* and the *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, have only existed since the late 1990s (Smiler, 2004). Division 51 of the American Psychological Association, the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity, was founded in 1995 and gained permanent status in 1997 (Division 51, 2010). Although more research is being conducted on men's gender roles, the relative novelty of this type of research, coupled with the fact that thus far it has focused mostly on traditional masculinity, may have resulted in only limited awareness of progressive masculinity within mainstream culture. These facts may account for why few male participants in this study were able to recall examples of when they had enacted progressive masculinity.

Another interesting difference in participants' responses to gender-role instructions was the presence of references to secondary sex characteristics in response to the "real" woman instruction but not to the "real" man instruction. Many female participants wrote that they had felt like a "real" woman the day they had bought their first bras, in response to their breast development, or the day they had begun menstruation. However, none of the male participants described corresponding biological changes, such as the growth of muscles, or facial or chest hair, in their responses.

This finding may be explained in several ways. First, mothers and other significant female role models often celebrate young women's pubertal development, such as by making a big deal about purchasing a first training bra, and therefore make puberty salient. A part of the traditional feminine gender role is to nurture and care for children (Crawford & Unger, 2000; Gilbert & Scher, 1999; Mahalik et al., 2005), so perhaps women who are guiding young girls through puberty offer more support for menstruation and breast development than men who are guiding young men through puberty. Women may celebrate signs of puberty in daughters in a way that they do not do for sons, or which sons might not welcome from their mothers. Likewise, fathers and other men also may be less likely to celebrate young men's pubertal development, perhaps because discussing emotions and being nurturing are not part of traditional masculine gender roles. Over time, greater articulation and acceptance of progressive masculinity may result in a wider array of acceptable responses by fathers to their sons who are undergoing puberty. Young men may also receive less attention for puberty milestones, such as facial hair growth and voice deepening because these changes occur slowly over time, whereas menstruation has a definite beginning. A perhaps comparable experience for men with a definite beginning is semenarche (Frankel, 2002; Stein & Reiser, 1994), though there has been little research on whether men feel this to be a marker of puberty or of masculinity. Additionally, there may be unique pressure on men to "prove" masculinity through traditional behaviors, whereas women may be perceived as feminine in part by virtue of their physical appearance.

A second potential explanation for gender differences in describing the development of secondary sex characteristics is that American culture places greater importance and value on female bodies than on male bodies. According to sexual objectification theory, society sexually objectifies women as objects of sexual gratification, with little regard for their personality (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Having a reproductively mature female body may create vulnerability to sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is important to note that only women participants responding to the "real" (traditional) instruction referenced secondary sex characteristics, which suggests that these bodily changes were not associated with female participants' conceptualization of progressive femininity. Female participants may have been aware of increased attention to their post-pubertal female bodies before they had begun puberty, and therefore may have been waiting to develop breasts

and begin menstruating before they had allowed themselves to identify as “real” women. Lee (1994), in her qualitative study of women’s narratives about their bodies, similarly discussed menarche as a major component of body politics whereby girls’ identity development as maturing women during menarche overlaps with them being socialized to see their bodies as sexual objects.

The last major trend in participants’ free responses to the gender-role instructions was the mention of competition. Almost half of the male participants referenced competition (regardless of instruction condition), but they only referenced competition with other males. This finding is consistent with traditional notions of masculinity, as dominance, the need for success, and winning are all intimately linked to both competition and traditional masculine gender roles (e.g. Mahalik et al., 2003; Messner, 2002; O’Neil, 2008). The more surprising finding was that over 90% of female participants who referenced competition did so with regard to competing with men. Additionally, female participants only referenced competition with men in response to *progressive* gender-role instructions. This finding suggests that some women defined progressive femininity at least in part as adherence to traditional *masculinity*, perhaps as a rejection of or a well-known alternative to traditional feminine gender roles. Some women may feel the need to gain power over men or to claim traditionally all-male spaces and activities in order to identify as progressive women. Though women rarely referenced female-female competition, the traditionality or progressiveness of those types of responses depends on the context. For example, competing with other mothers at a school bake sale to have the best cupcakes could be considered traditional, but competing with other female business executives at a company to yield the most company profits could be considered progressive.

Limitations and future research

Despite the insights generated by participants’ identification of personal examples conforming to traditional and progressive notions of gender in this study, it does have several limitations, and as a result, directions for future research. One limitation was the use of the terms “progressive” and “real,” as opposed to “progressive” and “traditional,” in priming participants to describe their gendered experiences. Howev-

er, the analyses confirmed that both male and female participants in the “real” condition understood that “real” meant “traditional,” and participants of both genders were able to recount situations in their lives in which they had felt as though they had been “real” men or women. Male participants may not have had a deep understanding of progressive masculinity, as relatively few were able to provide examples from their own lives of it. On the other hand, perhaps men *understood* the term, but had few life examples in which they had truly acted progressively. Or, a social desirability bias may have affected participants’ responses (which was not assessed for in this study). Some men may have recalled examples when they had behaved progressively, but felt uncomfortable reporting those memories for fear of a lack of acceptance of those behaviors by others. Future research should tease apart the source of the difference in women’s and men’s understanding and reporting of progressive notions of their own gender, in addition to using the terms “traditional” and “progressive,” perhaps in part by controlling for social desirability.

Another sampling-related potential limitation of this study is the exclusive use of collegians. The vast majority of participants were between 18 and 22 years old (only three individuals identified as older than 22). The youthful nature of the sample raises the question of whether experiences of these young adults are representative of people of all ages. Older individuals may have more career experiences, child-rearing experiences, and romantic relationships upon which to draw when responding to the instruction. This greater experience base, in turn, may affect their levels of gender-role conformity. In addition, themes that emerged from the data, such as competition created via playing sports and academic achievement, may not be mirrored in experiences of older adults. If a more inclusive sample had been recruited with regard to participants’ ages, different themes may have emerged at different age strata in the analyses. This concern mirrors one expressed by O’Neil, Good, and Holmes (1995), found that men at different ages and life stages showed different patterns in gender role conflict. However, these authors reported no evidence to suggest a simple overall increase or decrease in men’s gender role conflict across the lifespan.

Another methodological limitation to this study involved that fact that though the judges coded the data independently and were blind to participant condition, they both knew the study’s research questions, as well as the gender of participants because of the need for appropriate

coding. This study did not have any *a priori* hypotheses, so hypotheses could not have influenced coding, but nonetheless a stronger methodology could have involved the use of judges who were blind to the study's research questions in addition to being blind to participant condition. However, it would not have been possible to blind judges to participant gender because the responses themselves contained gender cues.

Though this article provided a working definition of progressive masculinity, the term still needs to be refined, as well as further operationalized through the creation of scales that measure individuals' espousal of and adherence to progressive masculinity. Further refining, researching, and thereby promoting the adoption of progressive masculinity may help men reconstruct their masculinity in more adaptable and effective ways. These could include improving their receptiveness to psychotherapy, their mental health, and the health of their personal relationships. The construct must also be further distinguished from and compared to other forms of masculinity, such as Kiselica and Englar-Carlson's (2010) and Hammer and Good's (2010) concept of positive aspects of traditional masculinity.

Further refining the literature's understanding of progressive masculinity could also occur through research that examines men's experiences with progressive masculinity. In the current study, male participants' responses to the "progressive" instruction suggest that an understanding of progressive masculinity may not be pervasive in mainstream culture. Future research should take a more inductive approach, comparing the current definition to those of community samples of participants. This could involve in-depth and exclusive examinations of progressive themes that emerge and do not emerge in the men's personal accounts of their own behaviors, values, and identities, and what contexts influence those constructs to align with progressive masculinity. For example, men may be more likely to espouse progressive beliefs when in the presence of other progressive men or women, a finding that could have concrete implications for interventions to increase progressiveness. Additionally, because the term "progressive" may mean something different to men and women, further comparisons between men's and women's conceptualizations of the construct could prove fruitful.

Though the research literature has explored many aspects of traditional masculinity, perhaps one of the next frontiers in the study of men and masculinity involves forging new alternatives toward which men who shun traditional, restrictive, and at times sexist gender roles can

move. Progressive masculinity, though shown in this study to be as of yet misunderstood in mainstream culture and perhaps even in the scientific literature, may hold promise for an expansion of what many men see as their only choices for masculinity.

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