

The Relationship Between Masculinity and Anxiety in Transgender Men

Marissa A. Phelps, Elyssa C. Berney, & Joseph H. Hammer

The expanding research into differing masculinities has begun to include how transgender and gender nonconforming men relate to their masculinity (e.g., Abelson, 2016). Prior research has shown that anxiety is related to cisgender men's conformity to masculine norms (O'Neil, 2008). This is thought to be due to masculine gender role stress – namely, that society's expectations for masculine expression is restrictive and unattainable (Mahalik, 2003) as well as restrictive emotionality's link with alexithymia (Wong et al., 2006). However, this relationship may look different for transgender men. Transgender men may experience increased anxiety due to discrimination that cisgender men do not, along with similar feelings of masculine gender role stress as cisgender men (Bouman et al., 2017). Alternatively, transgender men may exhibit less of a relationship between conformity to masculine norms and anxiety due to the feeling of attained congruence between gender expression and felt gender. With these competing explanations in mind, we hypothesize that conformity to masculine norms of self-reliance and emotional control (most correlated with restrictive emotionality; Parent & Moradi, 2009) will be associated with anxiety in transgender men. However, identification as “stealth”, or explicitly not disclosing transgender identity to others, may further influence the relationship between transgender men's conformity to masculine norms and their levels of anxiety (Budge, 2013). This study was designed to examine the relationship between transgender men's conformity to masculine norms, stealth status, and rates of generalized anxiety.

Participants were 260 transgender or transmasculine men recruited from Internet forums on the social media website Reddit (“subreddits”) focused on transgender identity (e.g., r/ftm, r/ftmover30). 124 men (47.4%) identified as stealth (Item: “Do you identify as stealth or non-

disclosing (i.e., not many people know about your transgender identity?") Participants ranged in age from 18 to 56 ($M = 26.90$, $SD = 6.95$). Participants identified as Caucasian/White (207; 79.6%), Multiracial (28; 10.8%), Hispanic/Latinx (6; 2.3%), Black/African American (6; 2.3%), Asian/Asian American (5; 1.9%), Other (1; 0.4%), or chose not to answer (7; 2.7%). 84 participants identified as bisexual, omnisexual, or pansexual (32.3%), 55 as gay or interested in men (21.2%), 40 as heterosexual, straight or interested in women (15.4%), 39 as queer (15.0%), 21 as asexual (8.1%), 14 as other (e.g., homoflexible; 5.4%), and 7 chose not to answer (2.7%). 180 participants were currently using hormone replacement therapy (69.2%), 72 were not (27.7%), and 8 chose not to answer (3.1%) .

Participants completed measures of conformity to the masculine norms of self-reliance and emotional control (CMNI-46; Parent & Moradi, 2009), generalized anxiety (GAD-7; Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Löwe, 2006), and 1 item concerning stealth status ("do you identify as stealth or non-disclosing (i.e., not many people know about your transgender identity?").

GAD-7 scores ranged from 0 to 21, $M = 8.996$, $SD = 5.84$, indicating mean scores above the suggested clinical cutoff for mild anxiety (Spitzer et al., 2006). Self-reliance was significantly positively correlated with generalized anxiety ($r = .277$, $p < .001$). By contrast, emotional control was not ($r = -.032$, $p = .609$). To determine interaction effects, moderation analysis was conducted by entering the standardized score of the Self-Reliance and binary response to the stealth item (0 = "stealth", 1 = "out"). In the Self-Reliance model, self-reliance had a significant ($p < .001$) main effect on GAD-7 scores ($\beta = .345$, $SE = .070$), whereas stealth status did not ($\beta = .435$, $SE = .273$, $p = .113$). The interaction term was also significantly negatively associated with generalized anxiety ($\beta = -.335$, $p < .05$), such that in stealth men, there was a nonsignificant positive relationship between self-reliance and anxiety, whereas for out men, there was a

moderate-to-strong significant positive relationship. The overall main effects was significant and accounted for 8.2% of the variance in GAD ($R^2 = .082$, $F(2, 257) = 11.515$, $p < .001$). The interaction model was also significant, $R^2 = .099$, $F(3, 356) = 9.381$, $p < .001$. The addition of interaction effects improved the model, $(\Delta)R^2 = .017$, $(\Delta)F = 4.774$, $p < .05$. These results indicate that for out trans men, the relationship between conformity to masculine norms and anxiety may mirror that of cisgender men. However, in stealth trans men, there is no such relationship between masculine norms and anxiety. This may be because of gender congruence or the avoidance of discrimination; implications and further research will be discussed.

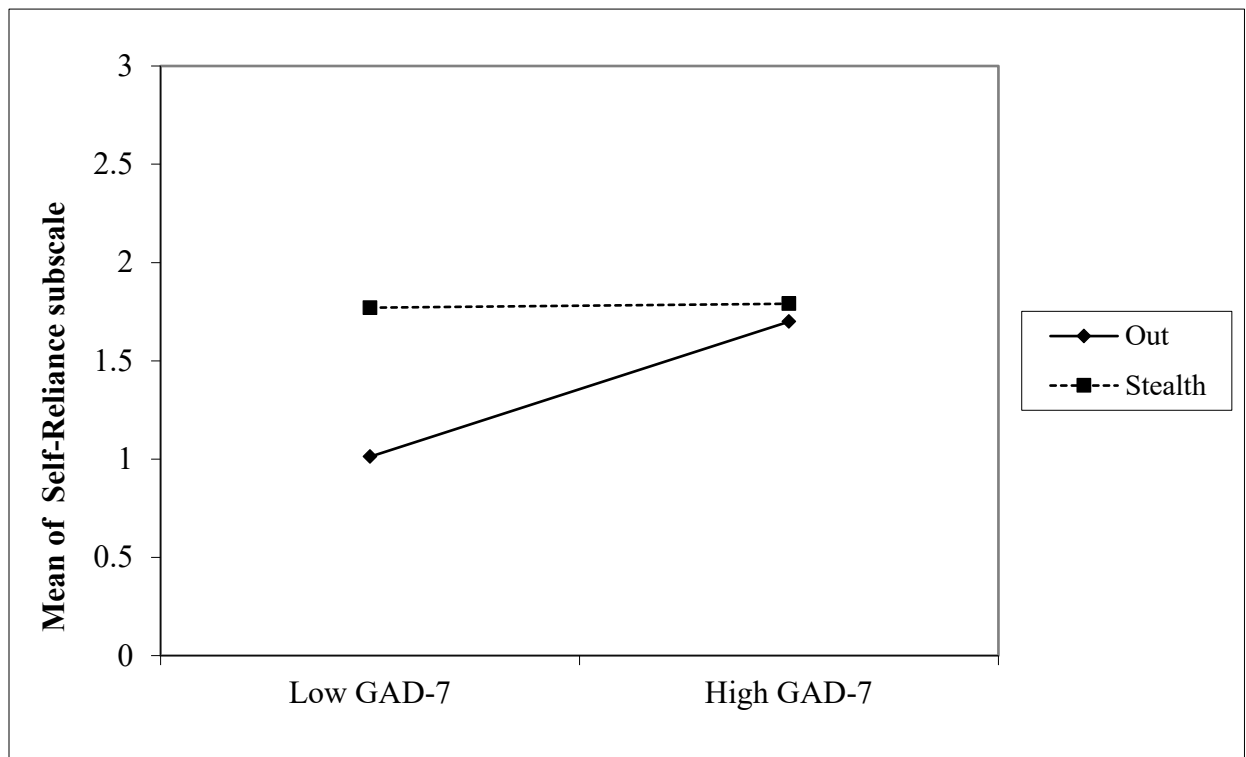


Figure 1. Simple slopes depicting interaction effects of stealth status and conformity to self-reliance on GAD-7 scores.

One possible theory is that out trans men are under more pressure to conform to masculine norms than cisgender men and that pressure leads to higher levels of anxiety. That is to say, out trans men may be held to stricter expectations of masculinity in order for society to accept them as “real men.” These raised expectations would probably not be seen in stealth trans men as the stealth factor can help prevent the increased expectations. Additionally, the relationship between conformity to self-reliance norms and anxiety in trans men could be related to the increased need to perform self-reliance due to the aforementioned societal expectations. It is important to note that the anxiety that out transgender men face in relation to masculine norms of self-reliance should be considered over the course of therapy.

Future research should further examine the relationship between conformity to masculine norms and anxiety in trans men. Certain questions to ask may be what do other dimensions of conformity to masculine norms and those relationships to anxiety look like in trans men; why are some categories of masculine norms not related to anxiety in trans men; how performing those masculine norms relates to anxiety; whether being stealth factors into any of the aforementioned question, etc.

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