

# Think it's easy to be macho? Psychologists show how 'precarious' manhood is

May 02, 2011

Manhood is a “precarious” status—difficult to earn and easy to lose. And when it's threatened, men see aggression as a good way to hold onto it. These are the conclusions of a new article by University of South Florida psychologists Jennifer K. Bosson and Joseph A. Vandello. The paper is published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

“Gender is social,” says, Bosson. “Men know this. They are powerfully concerned about how they appear in other people's eyes.” And the more concerned they are, the more they will suffer psychologically when their manhood feels violated. Gender role violation can be a big thing, like losing a job, or a little thing, like being asked to braid hair in a laboratory.

In several studies, Bosson and her colleagues used that task to force men to behave in a “feminine” manner, and recorded what happened. In one study, some men braided hair; others did the more masculine—or gender-neutral—task of braiding rope. Given the options afterwards of punching a bag or doing a puzzle, the hair-braiders overwhelmingly chose the former. When one group of men braided hair and others did not, and all punched the bag, the hair-braiders punched harder. When they all braided hair and only some got to punch, the non-punchers evinced more anxiety on a subsequent test.

Aggression, write the authors, is a “manhood-restoring tactic.”

When men use this tactic, or consider it, they tend to feel they were compelled by outside forces to do so. Bosson and her colleagues gave men and women a mock police report, in which either a man or a woman hit someone of their own sex after that person taunted them, insulting their manhood (or womanhood). Why did the person get violent? When the protagonist was a woman, both sexes attributed the act to character traits, such as immaturity; the women also said this about the male aggressors. But when the aggressor was a man, the men mostly believed he was provoked; humiliation forced him to defend his manhood.

Interestingly, people tend to feel manhood is defined by achievements, not biology. Womanhood, on the other hand, is seen primarily as a biological state. So manhood can be “lost” through social transgressions, whereas womanhood is “lost” only by physical changes, such as menopause.

Who judges manhood so stringently? “Women are not the main punishers of gender role violations,” says Bosson. Other men are.

Bosson says that this area of research gives psychological evidence to sociological and political theories calling gender a social, not a biological, phenomenon. And it begins to demonstrate the negative effects of gender on men—depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, or violence.

The work has also changed Bosson personally. “When I was younger I felt annoyed by my male friends who would refuse to hold a pocketbook or say whether they thought another man was attractive. I thought it was a personal shortcoming that they were so anxious about their manhood. Now I feel much more sympathy for men.”