Attachment Styles: Relationship to Masculine Gender Role Conflict in College Men

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This study examined the relationship between masculine gender role conflict and attachment in college men. One hundred seventy male undergraduate students completed the Gender Role Conflict Scale (J. M. O’Neil, B. Helms, R. Gable, L. David, & L. Wrightsman, 1986) and the Relationship Questionnaire (K. Bartholomew & L. M. Horowitz, 1991). The results demonstrated that men with secure attachment styles had significantly less gender role conflict with Restrictive Emotionality when compared with men with preoccupied, dismissive, or fearful attachment styles. In addition, men with a secure attachment style had significantly less conflict with Success, Power, and Competition when compared with men with fearful attachment styles. Implications of the results for understanding the relationship between attachment and masculine gender role conflict are discussed.

Early relational experiences have been theorized to affect gender role socialization and consequent gender roles (O’Neil, 1982; Shaver et al., 1996). Similarly, theorists have postulated that early attachment bonds are affected by gender role socialization (Block, 1984; Pollack, 1995). A negative consequence of male gender role socialization, gender role conflict occurs when “rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles, learned during socialization, results in personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self” (O’Neil, 1990, p. 25). Gender role conflict can also be depicted as the experiences of unwanted consequences because of gender roles dictated by society (Stillson, O’Neil, & Owens, 1991). O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, and Wrightsman (1986) created the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS), which measures four masculine gender role conflict patterns or factors. Conflicts resulting from rigid masculine gender roles have been related to a variety of interpersonal and intrapersonal problems (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995; Mahalik, 2000; Sharpe & Heppner, 1991).

Attachment theory was originally conceptualized to explain observations of distress in infants and young children when separated from their parental caregiver (Bowlby, 1973). According to attachment theory, early experiences with caregivers serve as the basis for development of internal working models for how people view themselves and their expectations regarding the responsiveness of others in future relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1973). Bartholomew (1990) created a four-category classification scheme of attachment. The four-category model assesses strategies used to manage security in close adult relationships by categorizing attachment on two dimensions: “positivity of a person’s model of self (self-model) and positivity of a person’s model of others (other-model)” (Griffen & Bartholomew, 1994, p. 32).

A number of researchers have examined the relationship between attachment to parents and gender role conflict. Masculine gender role conflict has been linked to low parental attachment and fear of intimacy (Blazina & Watkins, 2000; DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002; Fischer & Good, 1998; Good et al., 1995; Rando, Fangman, & Olsen-Rando, 1996). In the majority of studies, Restrictive Emotionality was found to show the strongest correlation to low attachment to parents (Blazina & Watkins, 2000; Fischer & Good, 1998; Rando et al., 1996). In contrast, Fischer and Good (1998) found that in male college student participants, secure attachment to their mothers was associated with increased gender role conflict on Success, Power, and Competition.
The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between adult attachment styles and masculine gender role conflict in college men. A relationship has been established between gender role conflict and attachment to parents in men. This will be the first study to examine the four-category model of attachment and gender role conflict. It was hypothesized that those with a secure attachment style will have less gender role conflict than individuals with insecure attachment styles (preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful).

Method

Participants

One hundred seventy male undergraduate students were solicited from undergraduate psychology and education classes from a medium size Southwestern university to participate in the study. The ethnic-racial composition of the research participants was as follows: White Non-Hispanic, 64%; Hispanic, 24%; Black Non-Hispanic, 4%; American Indian–Alaskan Native, 2%; Asian-Pacific Islander, 2%; and other, 4%. The mean age of the respondents was 24.57 years ($SD = 6.8$, range = 18–64).

Instruments

The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The RQ is a self-report measure designed to assess individual attachment styles. The RQ asks respondents to choose the attachment style that they perceive as most appropriate to their relational style from four short paragraphs describing attachment styles. The respondents are then asked to rate how each description corresponds to their general relational style on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all like me) to 7 (Very much like me). The RQ has demonstrated test–retest reliability over 8-month and 4-year periods (Kirkpatrick & Hazen, 1994; Sharfe & Bartholomew, 1994). Griffen and Bartholomew (1994) found evidence for construct, discriminate, and convergent validity of the RQ in three separate studies. The four attachment styles correlated appropriately with instruments measuring positive or negative views of self and others. The RQ can be used to categorize individuals into the most appropriate attachment style according to the first item, using the second item as a consistency check (Kemp & Neimeyer, 1999).

The GRCS (O’Neil et al., 1986). The GRCS is a 37-item self-report instrument. Each item is rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores on the GRCS indicate greater gender role conflict. The GRCS measures four areas of gender role conflict patterns: Success, Power, and Competition; Restrictive Emotionality; Restrictive Affectionate Behavior Between Men; and Conflict Between Work and Family Relations.

Evidence for reliability of the GRCS has been supported (Good et al., 1995). Validity of the four factors of the GRCS has been supported by exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (Good et al., 1995; O’Neil et al., 1986). Cronbach’s alphas demonstrated internal consistency for the GRCS subscales as follows: Success, Power, and Competition, .84; Restrictive Emotionality, .84; Restrictive Affectionate Behavior Between Men, .86; and Conflict Between Work and Family Relations, .81.

Results

Participants’ attachment styles were determined by their responses to the first item on the RQ. Fifty (30%) were identified as having secure attachment styles, 43 (25.8%) were identified as having fearful attachment styles, 30 (18%) were identified as having preoccupied attachment styles, and 44 (26.2%) were identified as having dismissing attachment styles. These percentages are consistent with previous research (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Kemp & Neimeyer, 1999). Means and standard deviations by attachment category for the four areas of gender role conflict are presented in Table 1.

A between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance revealed that participants’ identified attachment styles were associated with significant differences on the four areas of gender role conflict (Wilks’s $\lambda = .67$), $F(12, 423) = 5.60, p < .001$. Main effects were found for Restrictive Emotionality, $F(3, 164) = 15.37, p < .001$, and Success, Power, and Competition, $F(3, 164) = 3.30, p < .05$. There were no effects for Restrictive Affectionate Behavior Between Men, $F(3, 164) = 1.67, ns$, and Conflict Between Work and Family Relations, $F(3, 164) = 1.07, ns$.

Post hoc analyses were conducted using the Scheffe contrast method. This method was used because it is conservative and robust with an unequal number of participants (Barker & Barker, 1984). These results are also presented in Table 1. In general, it was found that participants with a secure attachment style scored significantly lower on the Restrictive Emotionality subscale than did those with the other three attachment styles and scored significantly lower on the Success, Power, and Competition subscale than those with a fearful attachment style.
Discussion

Participants in this study who had a secure attachment style were lower on Restrictive Emotionality than participants who had preoccupied, dismissing, or fearful attachment styles. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that masculine gender role conflict is related to parental attachment, particularly the gender role conflict factor of Restrictive Emotionality (O’Neil, 2002). Results of this study are also consistent with two other previous studies. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) found that participants with the fearful attachment style were lower than participants with the secure and preoccupied attachment styles on self-disclosure, intimacy, and reliance on others. Searle and Meara (1999) found that participants with the secure attachment style were not intensely focused on feeling but were comfortable expressing emotions as they experienced them.

Individuals with a secure attachment style were also lower on Success, Power, and Competition than those with a fearful attachment style. This finding contradicts previous research that found that a son’s secure attachment to his mother was related to increased gender role conflict with Success, Power, and Competition (Fischer & Good, 1998). The contradiction may be due to differences in the measurement of attachment. It may be that secure attachment to a parent is related to increased gender role conflict with Success, Power, and Competition but that an internalized secure attachment style is related to less conflict. Individuals with a fearful attachment style may overly focus on competition, achievement, and control over others to compensate for their lack of security.

The results of this study may be related to insecure attachment experiences in early childhood that engender feelings of negative self-worth and distrust of others (Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1979). The resulting negative internal models of self and others that develop may cause men to overidentify with traditional attitudes about what constitutes masculinity to form a sense of identity. Specifically, gender role conflict that is based on fear of appearing feminine may cause men to have difficulty expressing emotions and to become overly focused on success, achievement, and control over others. Continued failure to express emotions and pursuit of success, achievement, and control of others perpetuates insecure attachment (Blazina & Watkins, 2000). In this way, men’s insecure attachment and gender role conflict may be reinforcing and sustaining each other in a circular system throughout their adult lives.

Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the static group comparison research design, which prohibits conclusions concerning cause and effect. The results of this study do suggest a number of possible areas for future research. Future studies could examine age as a variable that may affect the constructs studied. Although attachment styles are theorized to be traits stemming from early experiences, research has demonstrated that the factors of gender role conflict may differ with age (Cournoyer & Mahalik, 1995). In addition, a longitudinal study would assist in examining whether the variables influenced each other over time. Research in this area would help in the design of preventative interventions to address gender role conflict and attachment at a younger age.

References


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Secure</th>
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</table>

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ at p < .05 in the Tukey’s honestly significant difference comparison. SPC = Success, Power, and Competition; RE = Restrictive Emotionality; RABB M = Restrictive Affective Behavior Between Men; CBWF R = Conflict Between Work and Family Relations.


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