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Time Spent in the Military as a Moderator of Endorsement of Traditional Masculinity Ideology Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Objective: Military culture perpetuates traditional masculine norms (Alfred, Good, & Hammer, 2014). The internalization of traditional masculinity has been linked to reduced relationship satisfaction among heterosexual couples (McGraw, 2001). The present study investigated the role of military service as moderator of the relationship between masculinity ideology and relationship satisfaction. Method: 155 heterosexual male military personnel in romantic relationships recruited from the internet reported length of service, endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology, and relationship satisfaction. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to evaluate if length of military service moderated the relationship between masculinity and relationship satisfaction. Results: Results were not consistent with previous findings that endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology predicts relationship satisfaction for men (McGraw, 2001). In addition, length of military service did not act as a moderator as hypothesized. Conclusion: Additional research is needed to clarify these results which conflict with recent findings on traditional masculinity and intimate relationships. Possible influential factors and directions for future research are explored.

Key words: traditional masculinity ideology, relationship satisfaction, servicemen, military couples
Time Spent in the Military as a Moderator of Endorsement of Traditional Masculinity Ideology Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

The military, which is often referred to as a “boys club,” is teeming with the perpetuation of traditional masculine norms such as self-reliance, emotional stoicism, aggression, and dominance. Traditional masculinity is highly valued in military culture since it is considered to bolster survival, mission completion, and contribute to the overall development of successful warriors. Researchers support military men tend to score high on measures of conformity to masculine norms (Alfred et al., 2014). Although valued by the military, adherence to traditional masculinity ideology may prove problematic for intimate relationships. Women’s expectations of male partners have evolved with the influence of feminism. Modern men are considered more desirable if they are less aggressive and more nurturing, committed, intimate, in touch with their feelings and communicative (Levant, 1997). Thus, military men may experience conflicting expectations between their work and personal lives.

The new psychology of men is a burgeoning field that examines masculinity using the framework of the Gender Role Strain Paradigm (Pleck, 1981). Gender role ideology, or an individual’s internalization of cultural belief systems concerning appropriate behavior for men and women, is a core construct in GRSP. Gender role ideologies are strongly influenced by the prevailing beliefs of a broader culture, which vary by social location and context. The internalization of cultural belief systems and attitudes towards masculinity and the male role are referred to as masculinity ideologies. Traditional masculinity ideology refers to the common set of expectations and standards for men fulfilling the traditional male role in Western culture. Gender role strain is the resulting stress of attempts to live up to or negotiate with cultural expectations of manhood. Previous research has explored difficulty in relationships as one
manifestation of gender role strain (Copenhaver, Lash, & Eisler, 2000; Fischer & Good, 1997; Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002). The Male Role Norms Inventory (MRNI) was developed to assess the degree to which individuals endorse traditional masculinity ideology and predicts a variety of outcomes for men (Levant & Richmond, 2007).

Within the GRSP framework, there is a modest literature on the connection between masculinity variables and quality of relationships. This research suggests traditional masculinity ideology negatively affects relationship satisfaction and quality. Though relationship satisfaction among military couples coping with post-traumatic stress disorder has received substantial investigation in the past, this study is focusing on how men’s gender role ideology impacts relationship satisfaction regardless of mental health. Studies have linked gender role ideology and other masculinity constructs to several aspects of romantic relationships, including aggression, interpersonal communication, fear of intimacy, and relationship satisfaction.

There is some evidence of a positive relationship between men’s masculinity ideology and violence, aggression, and abuse toward female partners. Increased relationship violence and aggression has been associated with men with high levels of Masculine Gender-Role Stress (MGRS) and traditional masculinity ideology. Copenhaver and colleagues (2000) found that among male veterans who abused substances, greater Masculine Gender-Role Stress (MGRS) was associated with more verbally abusive behavior, higher total intimately abusive behaviors (including verbal abuse, physical abuse, and severe aggression), and greater anger toward female counterparts. Consistent with this, Jakupcak et al. (2002) found that at high levels of traditional masculinity ideology, gender role stress significantly predicted men’s relationship aggression and violence. Thus, high endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology may
diminish the quality of intimate relationships through harmful abuse and violence directed at partners.

Alexithymia, or the inability to put words to one’s emotions, is believed to result from traditional masculine gender role socialization which encourages boys to hide their emotions, especially feelings of vulnerability (Karakis & Levant, 2012). Indeed, Masculine Gender-Role Stress and gender role conflict, especially emotional inexpressiveness and restrictive emotionality, have been associated with alexithymia which itself is tied to poorer relationship quality (Fischer and Good, 1997). Results of Karakis and Levant’s (2012) study supports that men experiencing higher levels of normative male alexithymia (NMA) are less likely to be satisfied in their intimate relationships and to facilitate effective communication with romantic partners. Foran and O’Leary (2013) found alexithymia had a direct effect on both relationship functioning and depressive symptoms among couples. Alexithymia’s impact on depressive symptoms was partially explained by relationship functioning. Moreover, alexithymia and masculinity ideology have been connected to fear of intimacy and less actual intimacy with a romantic partner (Fischer and Good, 1997; Karakis & Levant, 2012; Pleck, Sonenstein, and Ku, 1993).

Certain studies have examined masculinity ideology’s influence on relationship satisfaction directly. Investigators have found men who endorse traditional masculine norms to a higher degree experience diminished relationship satisfaction, as do their female counterparts (Burn & Ward, 2005; McGraw, 2001). One study found men who more strongly endorsed traditional masculinity ideology were perceived by their female partners to be lower in closeness and caregiving, signifying they showed less warmth, spent less time with their female partners, were less nurturing, and were higher in aggression and authority (McGraw, 2001).
A review of the literature suggests a negative relationship between masculinity variables and relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and communication. Greater endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology and related variables generally indicates lower relationship quality. Numerous studies have analyzed the negative effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and combat on intimate relationships (Dekel, Goldblatt, Keidar, Solomon, & Polliack, 2005; Gimbel & Booth, 1994; Monson, Taft, & Fredman, 2009). Although studies like Copenhaver et al. (2000) indicate that masculinity ideology in veterans is linked to aggressive behavior, no study to the author’s knowledge has explored whether or not traditional masculinity ideology perpetuated by military culture and adopted by men serves as a fundamental component of relationship discord between servicemen and their partners.

The Present Study

In order to address the gap in the literature, the present study investigated the relationship between traditional masculinity ideology and relationship satisfaction among heterosexual male military personnel. Since time spent in the military may further reinforce traditional masculinity ideology beliefs, time served may contribute to relationship dissatisfaction. This possibility is yet to have been considered in the literature. Therefore, the relationship between masculinity ideology and relationship satisfaction was theorized to be moderated by the participant’s length of military service. We tested the following hypotheses:

1. Endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology will be negatively related to relationship satisfaction (shown in Figure 1)

2. Length of service will moderate the relationship between traditional masculinity ideology and relationship satisfaction, such that the slope will steepen as service time extends (shown in Figure 2)
Method

Participants

Participants were 155 heterosexual male military personnel currently in intimate relationships. Survey responders were prompted with a text box to submit their age. Ages ranged from 19 to 89, with a median of 33 and a mode of 26. All participants were involved in a relationship that included currently married/partnered/engaged (72.90%), dating exclusively (23.23%), and dating casually (3.87%). Relationship length spanned from 1 month to 64 years, with a median of 5 years and a mode of 3 years. The majority of participants identified as exclusively White/European American (77.42%). Length of military service spanned from 1 to 39 years, with a median of 7.5 years and a mode of 4 years. No incentive was offered for participation in the present study.

Procedure

The study was approved by The University of Akron institutional review board. Participants were solicited from the website craigslist.org, where posts were made to the ‘volunteers’ sections of various cities. The first page of the survey provided the informed consent information, and participants who consented clicked “I accept”. Upon completion of the survey, participants were provided with an educational briefing on the study. Analyses were completed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22.0.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire. This questionnaire inquired about gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, highest degree completed, family/household income, length of military service, and relationship length.
Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form (MRNI-SF). The MRNI-SF (Levant, Hall & Rankin, 2013) is a 21-item measure of traditional masculinity ideology with items rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of endorsement of traditional masculinity ideology. Confirmatory Factor Analysis found that the best fitting model was a bi-factor structure, in which each observed indicator was modeled as being caused by a general traditional masculinity ideology latent factor (which causes all 21 indicators), and seven specific latent factors reflecting specific masculine norms (each of which causes 3 indicators). These specific norms, sample items, and alpha coefficients of raw scores are reported by the scale developers: Restrictive Emotionality (e.g., “Men should not be too quick to tell others that they care about them,” α = .83); Self-reliance through Mechanical Skills (e.g., “Men should be able to fix most things around the house,” α = .86); Negativity Toward Sexual Minorities (e.g., “Homosexuals should never marry,” α = .88); Avoidance of Femininity (e.g., “A man should prefer watching action movies to reading romantic novels,” α = .90); Importance of Sex (e.g., “A man should always be ready for sex,” α = .83); Dominance (e.g., “A man should always be the boss,” α = .87); and Toughness (e.g., “I think a young man should try to be physically tough, even if he’s not,” α = .79). For the general traditional masculinity ideology latent factor, the α coefficient of the raw score was .92. For the present study, response to items on the total MRNI-SF had an alpha of α = .92. Evidence for construct validity for its predecessor, the MRNI-R, was provided in Levant, Rankin, Williams, Hasan and Smalley (2010).

Couples Satisfaction Index-16 (CSI-16). The CSI-16 (Funk & Rogge, 2007) is a measure of relationship satisfaction with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. The 16 items are added together for a total score ranging from 0 to 81 (Kimmes, Edwards, Wetchler
& Bercik, 2014). Scale developers reported coefficient $\alpha = .98$ for the CSI-16, and evidence of excellent construct and convergent validity with other measures of relationship satisfaction but with heightened precision and power. 15 of the items are scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 0 to 5. One question, “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship,” is scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ($0 = \text{Extremely Unhappy}; 6 = \text{Perfect}$). For the current study, response to items on the CSI-16 had an alpha of $\alpha = .97$.

**Results**

**Data Cleaning and Missing Data Procedures**

Two hundred and thirty nine participants initially responded to the online survey. However, 84 participants were removed due to ineligibility (identifying as female, single, or non-heterosexual) and insufficient data (i.e. not beginning all scales). The final sample included 155 participants resulting in a 64.9% completion rate. Missing values were treated using ipsative mean substitution which computes the mean of each individual participant’s answers on scale items and utilizes this mean for missing values.

**Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), alpha coefficients, and correlations of study variables are displayed in Table 1.

**Hypothesis Testing**

The first hypothesis, that scores on the MRNI-SF would correlate negatively with scores on the CSI-16, was not supported ($r = .092, p = .270$). The second hypothesis, that length of military service would moderate the relationship between traditional masculinity ideology and relationship satisfaction, was not supported ($b = .002, p = .826$). Results of the multiple regression analysis including beta coefficients, $t$-values and $p$-values are shown in Table 2.
Other Findings

Length of military service was found to significantly correlate with age ($r = .536, p < .001$) and relationship length ($r = .360, p < .001$). Length of relationship also correlated significantly with age ($r = .768, p < .001$).

Discussion

Results of the present study did not support the hypotheses that traditional masculinity would be associated with decreased relationship satisfaction, which would altogether be moderated by length of service. There are a number of potential explanations for these unexpected findings. It could be that our analyses were underpowered with a sample size of 155 lacking adequate strength to observe an effect. Researchers should consider replicating this study with a larger pool of participants. The relatively high reports of relationship satisfaction ($M = 60.33$) may have been a contributing factor to the current study’s lack of significant results. Due to the self-report nature of the study, it is possible that results were influenced by social–desirability. Future studies may wish to utilize a multi-method design which may provide better support of hypothesized relationships than survey data alone. Additionally, participants who self-selected to take our survey without a given incentive may be more eager to discuss their relationships, or generally more satisfied by them. By offering an incentive for participation, future researchers may be more successful in collecting a sample with more diversity in regard to relationship (dis)satisfaction. Moreover, some literature suggests female partners of traditional men may experience more relationship dissatisfaction than male partners themselves. This is particularly salient in Burn and Ward’s (2005) study in which men’s conformity to traditional masculine norms more strongly influenced women’s relationship satisfaction than men’s.
Collecting additional data from female partners of male participants may allow investigators to gain a broader understanding of the couple’s relationship satisfaction as a whole.

These findings are inconsistent with prior work that demonstrated a link between masculinity ideology and relationship satisfaction (Burn & Ward, 2005; McGraw, 2001). Results conflict with Gender Role Strain Paradigm’s assertion that traditional masculinity ideology is associated with interpersonal strain. Further research is needed to shed light upon these unanticipated findings. As participants were predominantly married/partnered/engaged (72.90%) with a median relationship duration of 5 years, it is possible our data stemmed largely from happily committed, willing to participate military men. Subsequent investigators may wish to consider providing the option to reflect on one’s most recent relationship if not currently partnered in order to attain a more representative sample of military men, some of which may not have benefited from successful long-term relationships.

**Limitations and Future Directions for Research**

There are several limitations to the current study. First, our sample was comprised mainly of white married, partnered, and engaged men. A more diverse sample in regard to race/ethnicity and relationship status may increase representativeness of a military sample. Second, a small percentage of individuals identified as “dating casually” (3.87%). Though advertisements called for men in relationships specifically, some may question the meaningfulness of data from casually dating couples. Future researchers may wish to exclude these individuals. Third, participants were not explicitly asked to identify the sex of their partners. Consequently, though all included men self-identified as heterosexual, one cannot be sure participants were indeed partnered with a female.
This study opens the door to exploring the connections between masculinity, military culture, and relationship satisfaction. Men may experience conflicting expectations between masculine military culture and intimate partnerships (Alfred et al., 2014; Levant, 1997). Revisions to study variables such as the inclusion of female partners or the option of reflecting on one’s most recent partner may yield different results. Future investigators may wish to employ a multi-method research design (potentially with an interview component) which may facilitate better understanding of military men and their relationships than survey data alone and limit the effects of socially-desirable responding.
References


Figure 1
Figure 2
Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations and Alphas of All Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Scale 1</th>
<th>Scale 2</th>
<th>Scale 3</th>
<th>Scale 4</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<td>1. Age</td>
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<td>2. Relationship</td>
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<td>3. Service</td>
<td>.536*</td>
<td>.360*</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>8.61</td>
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<td>4. CSI</td>
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<td>.103</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>60.33</td>
<td>17.45</td>
<td>.969</td>
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<td>-.105</td>
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<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.917</td>
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</table>

*Note. CSI, Couples Satisfaction Index; MRNI-SF, Male Role Norms Inventory- Short Form*

*p < .001
Table 2

*Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Male Role Norms Inventory-Short Form and Length of Service Predicting Couples Satisfaction Index Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>b</th>
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<th>t</th>
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<td>.220</td>
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