

## **Sex Role Identity and Self-Esteem: A Comparison of Children and Adolescents<sup>1</sup>**

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*While data from a sample of fourth-grade children indicate that both self-efficacy (masculinity) and relationality (femininity) are strongly associated with self-esteem for both girls and boys, results from a comparable sample of adolescents aged 14-18 and a subsample of the fourth graders when they were in twelfth grade indicate that only self-efficacy is generally associated with self-esteem. An association between relationality and self-esteem is found in adolescents only for a small, high-achieving, high-SES subset of "androgynous" males.*

Literature that examines the relationship between sex role identity and psychological well-being has included three models: the traditional sex-typed model (e.g., Abraham, 1911/1949, Kagan, 1964; Mussen, 1969), the androgyny model (Bem, 1974, 1979; Spence & Helmrich, 1978), and the masculinity model supported by recent meta-analytic studies (Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Taylor & Hall, 1982; Whitley, 1983, 1984). Each of these models assumes that stereotypic masculinity is measured by traits generally associated with self-efficacy and femininity is measured by traits associated with expressiveness and relationality. [Given recent criticisms of these scales, and especially, questions concerning the extent to which they accurately reflect theoretical and empirical differences between males and females at a variety of ages (e.g., Gill, Stockard, Johnson, & Williams, 1987), we use the

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term "self-efficacy" to describe scores on the scales traditionally termed masculine and relationality to describe traits measured by traditional femininity scales.] The traditional model assumes that males' identification with efficacy and females' identification with relationality are paramount to mental health. In contrast, the androgyny model asserts that both males and females high in efficacy and relationality are more likely to be psychologically well adjusted than either undifferentiated individuals who report low identification with both or those who are identified with only their own sex-stereotypic characteristics. The masculinity model, on the other hand, views self-efficacy as the critical component in mentally healthy individuals of both sex groups.

The evidence in support of a masculinity model in college and adult populations is compelling (see Bassoff & Glass, 1982; Taylor & Hall, 1982; Whitley, 1983, 1984). It is not at all clear, however, whether such a model is applicable to children and/or adolescents. The present study investigates the associations of self-reported self-efficacy (masculinity) and relationality (femininity) in fourth graders and high school students, and analyzes the relation of these variables to self-esteem in each age group. Based on evidence showing self-esteem to be a fairly good predictor of mental health in adults (Coopersmith 1967) and adolescents (Rosenberg 1985), self-esteem is used as an indicator of psychological well-being.

### RELATED LITERATURE

Although theory abounds concerning the importance of sex-stereotypic characteristics to mental health during adolescence (Erikson, 1950; Kohlberg, 1966), little evidence supports this claim. Some researchers have found measures of both self-efficacy and relationality positively associated with self-esteem in both female and male high school students (Spence & Helmrich, 1978), while others have found self-efficacy to be the more important predictor (Lamke, 1982; Lerner, Sorell, & Brackney, 1981; Ziegler, Dusek, & Carter, 1984). Wells (1980) reported that for adolescent males neither self-efficacy nor relationality was significantly related to self-esteem, although self-efficacy was predictive for females, and Massad (1981) concluded that the traditional view advocating sex-stereotypic identification seems applicable to males whereas an androgyny model seems best suited for females. Still others who endorse the desirability of androgyny in adulthood propose that healthy adjustment in adolescence is characterized by adoption of a stereotypic masculine or feminine sex role identification (e.g., Pleck, 1975).

Thus, while the literature on adolescents is mixed and sparse, somewhat more results seem to support the masculinity model than other

theories, leading us to hypothesize that associations of sex-typed attributes with self-esteem in adolescents will be similar to those reported in the preponderance of studies of adults and college students, to wit: that self-efficacy is positively related to psychological health in both females and males, and that relationality is only minimally related, if at all.

Associations of sex-typed characteristics with psychological well-being in prepubertal children are even less clear. The literature suggests that adolescent patterns of sex differences in psychopathology differ dramatically from those observed in children (Rutter, 1986). For example, the 2:1 ratio of females to males in depressed adults has also been found to exist in depressed adolescents (Lewinsohn, Hops, Roberts, & Seely, 1988; Schoebach, Garrison, & Kaplan, 1984), whereas in children depression occurs in boys and girls with about equal frequency (Rutter, 1986). It is also during adolescence that eating disorders develop with an even higher female preponderance—about 9:1. These dramatic shifts in adolescence toward female psychopathology suggest that there may be something profoundly unhealthy about the passage to adulthood for young women.

As it exists today, adolescence is a culturally created developmental period in which young people take on intensified sex-typed roles and accommodate to the pervasive deference accorded to males in adult heterosexual relations. Inherent in these roles is a greater valuation, authority, and prestige accorded to masculine qualities and activities, and a devaluation of feminine ones (Stockard & Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1988). The transition from childhood to adulthood appears to involve a transition from the relatively egalitarian, although highly segregated, world of childhood to a highly unequal adult world where male dominance appears not only in the economic and political world, but also in day-to-day interactions. The extent to which these role changes might affect the association of sex-typed attributes with psychological well being is not known. We can posit no specific hypotheses regarding these associations in children except to suggest that they will be different from the associations in adolescents and adults.

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Participants*

Two separate studies were conducted for the present investigation. Participants in both were predominantly white, public school students in western Oregon. The first was a study of adolescents in grades nine through twelve in a largely middle-class community. Cross-sectional data are available for 799 students (412 girls, 387 boys). The second was a study of fourth

graders in a predominantly working-class community. Cross-sectional data are available in this second sample for 607 students (300 girls, 307 boys), with longitudinal data from a subset of 52 students (32 girls, 20 boys) who were first tested in the fourth grade and later tested in the twelfth grade using the same instruments each time. This subset is hereinafter referred to as the panel study. Students in the panel study have significantly higher fourth-grade achievement test scores ( $t = 3.33$ ,  $df = 57$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and mothers with significantly more education ( $t = 3.42$ ,  $df = 68$ ,  $p = .001$ ) than those in the total fourth-grade group.

### Procedures

After obtaining parental permission, questionnaires were administered to the students in their classrooms by trained research assistants.

### Measures

The Personal Attributes Questionnaire Short Version (PAQ; Spence Helmrich, & Stapp, 1974) was used to assess the degree to which the adolescent respondents identified with feminine or masculine stereotypes. The PAQ Short Version is a widely used instrument composed of 24 bipolar items describing personal characteristics on which respondents rate themselves on a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire is divided into three eight-item scales labeled Masculinity (M), Femininity (F), and Masculinity-Femininity (M-F). Masculine attributes are those typically associated with self-sufficiency and self-efficacy, whereas feminine attributes are those typically associated with communality and relationality. For purpose of this analysis, only the "masculinity" and "femininity" scales were used.

The fourth graders' sex-typed personality characteristics were measured by a modified version of the Children's PAQ, which has been found to be highly correlated with scores on the adult version (Hall & Halberstadt, 1980). All questions required the children to note on a 4-point scale how true a statement was of them. Scores on each scale were averaged so that they would be comparable to each other. The items used to measure self-efficacy or masculinity included (1) "I give up easily" (reversed), (2) "It is easy for people to make me change my mind" (reversed), (3) "I do not do well in sports" (reversed), (4) "In most ways, I am better than most of the other kids my age," (5) "I am more active than most kids my age," (6) "I am often the leader among my friends," (7) "I almost always stand up for what I believe in," and (8) "When things get tough, I almost always keep trying." Coefficient alpha for this scale was .62 for the total fourth-grade sample, .60 for the panel fourth graders, and .78 for the twelfth-grade

data from the panel study. The items used to measure relationality or stereotypical femininity included the following items: (1) "I am a gentle person," (2) "My art work and my ideas are creative and original," (3) "I am a very considerate person (thoughtful person)," (4) "I do not help other people very much" (reversed), (5) "I am kind to other people almost all of the time," and (6) "I try to do everything I can for the people I care about." Coefficient alpha for this scale was .66 for the total fourth-grade sample, .67 for fourth graders in the panel study, and .77 for the twelfth-grade data from the panel study.

Self-esteem was measured for both groups with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory, a widely used self-report measure in which respondents rate their agreement with the statements on a 4-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (Rosenberg, 1965). Responses on the 10-item scale were summed and averaged, with a higher score indicating a more positive self-concept.

### Analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and effect sizes) and  $t$  tests were used to examine the scores of the boys and girls on each of the variables described above and changes over time for the panel group. Pearson product moment correlations were then used to examine the association between the students' perceptions of their sex-typed personality traits and self-esteem. Changes in correlations over time for the panel group were assessed with the procedures recommended by Steiger (1980).

## RESULTS

Table I presents the mean scores for females and males on each of the variables measured. In all of the groups the males report higher average scores than the females on the self-esteem and self-efficacy scales, while the females have higher average scores on the relationality scale. These sex differences are statistically significant for both the adolescent sample and the total group of fourth graders while in the panel study only the masculinity measure yields statistically significant sex differences. However, the effect sizes for the self-esteem and self-efficacy measures are comparable throughout all the groups, suggesting that the lack of significance in differences on these measures in the panel study reflects its smaller sample size.

In all cases females perceive themselves as more relational than self-efficacious. (For the total group of fourth-grade girls, the average

**Table I.** Mean Scores and Standard Deviations, all Variables, Females and Males, Fourth Graders and Adolescents

	Females		Males		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i> <sup>a</sup>
	Mean	( <i>SD</i> )	Mean	( <i>SD</i> )				
Self-esteem								
Fourth graders (Total group)	2.94	(0.54)	3.07	(0.50)	-3.12	602	<.002	-.25
Fourth graders (Panel study)	3.11	(0.47)	3.32	(0.43)	-1.60	50	.12	-.47
Twelfth graders (Panel study)	3.12	(0.56)	3.26	(0.55)	-.88	50	.38	-.25
Adolescents	2.83	(0.53)	3.05	(0.48)	-6.13	797	<.001	-.43
Self-efficacy								
Fourth graders (Total group)	2.76	(0.45)	3.05	(0.48)	-7.73	598	<.001	-.62
Fourth graders (Panel study)	2.88	(0.38)	3.19	(0.44)	-2.65	50	.01	-.76
Twelfth graders (Panel study)	2.96	(0.50)	3.23	(0.50)	-1.90	50	.06	-.54
Adolescents	3.46	(0.55)	3.75	(0.49)	-7.90	797	<.001	-.56
Relationality								
Fourth graders (Total group)	3.13	(0.54)	2.94	(0.52)	4.20	598	<.001	.36
Fourth graders (Panel study)	3.08	(0.52)	3.07	(0.51)	.11	50	<.91	.02
Twelfth graders (Panel study)	3.31	(0.42)	3.25	(0.66)	.38	50	.70	.11
Adolescents	3.99	(0.47)	3.53	(0.66)	11.17	797	<.001	.80

<sup>a</sup>Cohen's *d* equals the difference between the two means divided by the common standard deviation. Cohen (1977) suggests that effect sizes of .2 could be considered small, those of .5 medium in size, and those of .8 or greater to be large.

difference between relationality and self-efficacy scores is .36,  $t = 10.68$ ,  $df = 299$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for fourth-grade panel girls the mean difference is .20,  $t = 1.80$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p = .08$ ; for twelfth-grade panel girls the mean difference is .35,  $t = 3.11$ ,  $df = 31$ ,  $p = .004$ ; and for the adolescent girls the mean difference is .53,  $t = 15.14$ ,  $df = 299$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In general, males see themselves as more efficacious than relational, although the differences are smaller than with the females. The major exception are the twelfth-grade boys in the panel study who describe themselves as almost equally relational and efficacious. (For the total group of fourth-grade boys the average difference is .11,  $t = 3.01$ ,  $df = 304$ ,  $p = .003$ ; for fourth-grade panel boys the mean difference is .12,  $t = .88$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $p = .39$ ; for twelfth-grade panel boys the mean difference is .02,  $t = .18$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $p = .39$ ; and for the adolescent boys the mean difference is .22,  $t = 5.5$ ,  $df = 306$ , and  $p < .001$ ). In all groups the girls are more sex typed than the boys.

It is interesting to note that the small subset of fourth graders who were followed through the twelfth grade appears less sex typed than the overall group of fourth graders, and this seems particularly true for the boys. Compared to the total fourth-grade sample, boys in the subset report slightly more relationality ( $t = 1.28$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $p = .21$ ), girls report slightly less relationality ( $t = -.49$ ,  $df = 40$ ,  $p = .63$ ), and both report greater self-efficacy ( $t = 1.194$ ,  $df = 42$ ,  $p = .06$  for girls;  $t = 2.04$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $p = .05$  for boys) and higher self-esteem ( $t = 2.11$ ,  $df = 41$ ,  $p = .04$  for girls,  $t = 3.16$ ,  $df = 26$ ,  $p = .004$  for boys).

Both boys and girls in the panel study have slightly higher scores on self-efficacy and relationality in the fourth grade than in the twelfth grade. (for girls the average difference = .22,  $t = 2.24$ ,  $p = .03$  for relationality, average difference = .08,  $t = .88$ ,  $p = .38$  for self-efficacy; for boys average difference = .18,  $t = 1.14$ ,  $p = .27$  for relationality, average difference = .04,  $t = .35$ ,  $p = .73$  for self-efficacy.) The girls in the panel study, but not the boys, are more strongly sex typed in twelfth grade than in fourth grade.

Table II presents the correlations between the measures of sex-typed attributes and self-esteem. Self-efficacy, our measure of masculine attributes, is strongly associated with self-esteem for both males and females in all samples. Moreover, the correlation between self-efficacy and self-esteem increases significantly from fourth to twelfth grade for the girls in the panel study ( $z = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

However, relationality, our measure of feminine attributes, is strongly associated with self-esteem only for the fourth graders (both boys and girls) and the small subset of twelfth-grade boys in the panel study. The corre-

**Table II.** Pearson Product Moment Correlations of Self-Esteem with Self-Efficacy and Relationality, Females and Males, Fourth Graders and Adolescents

	Fourth graders	Self-efficacy	Relationality
Females			
Total fourth-grade sample		.44 <sup>c</sup>	.45 <sup>c</sup>
Panel fourth-grade sample		.47 <sup>b</sup>	.44 <sup>b</sup>
Panel twelfth-grade sample		.71 <sup>c</sup>	.01
Adolescents		.49 <sup>c</sup>	.07
Males			
Total fourth-grade sample		.51 <sup>c</sup>	.34 <sup>c</sup>
Panel fourth-grade sample		.43 <sup>a</sup>	.48 <sup>a</sup>
Panel twelfth-grade sample		.54 <sup>b</sup>	.42 <sup>a</sup>
Adolescents		.42 <sup>c</sup>	.15 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>b</sup> $p < .01$ .

<sup>c</sup> $p < .001$ .

lation is statistically significant for the group of adolescent boys, but is substantially smaller than the correlations found with the other groups of boys and might be dismissed as substantively insignificant. The decline in the correlation between relationality and self-esteem from fourth to twelfth grade for girls in the panel study is statistically significant ( $z = 2.01, p < .05$ ). For females in the large adolescent sample and as twelfth graders in the panel study there is no association between feminine attributes and self-esteem, and the association for males in the large adolescent sample is also relatively small.

Results not reported here indicate that this pattern of associations occurs when fourth-grade achievement and mother's educational level are introduced as control variables for the students in the fourth-grade and panel group, and when results are examined separately within each grade level for those in the adolescent sample.

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

As expected, the associations of sex-typed attributes with self-esteem for adolescents are consistent with those found in college samples and adults, supporting the masculinity model. Self-efficacy, but not relationality, is strongly associated with self-esteem, especially for females. In contrast, both self-efficacy and relationality are associated with self-esteem for both sex groups in the fourth graders, providing support for the androgyny model. Our results suggest that as children move into adolescence where adult sex-typed roles and attitudes become more salient, relationality is no longer associated with self-esteem, especially for females. The association between relationality and self-esteem remained strong only for the high-SES, high-achieving twelfth-grade boys in the panel study, a group unique in its equally high self-ratings on both relationality and self-efficacy.

The association between masculine-typed traits and self-esteem is not surprising. As Richmond (1984, p. 1031) notes, "the concepts of masculinity and self-esteem are both defined by the idea of standing up for oneself, having a distinctive point of view, and being independent and self-sufficient. . . . [T]he relationship is logical rather than empirical." Thus, a strong association could, by definition, be expected to be both positive and significant, whatever the life stage. Of more interest is the finding that the ideal stereotypic feminine traits of expressiveness or relationality are associated with self-esteem among children but not generally among adolescents. This suggests that while feminine traits have prestige and importance in the world of children they are devalued in the world of adolescence. Thus it is not surprising that adolescent boys would diminish the importance of relationality in their self-concepts and that adolescent

girls, while not rejecting relationality, would develop less positive self-concepts.

It is noteworthy that the one group that exhibited a significant correlation between relationality and self-esteem in adolescence is the group that would be seen as most "androgynous." In other words, only those adolescents who perceived themselves as equally relational and efficacious associated relationality with self-esteem. Thus the androgyny model of psychological well-being was supported only among a small group of higher SES and high-achieving adolescent males reporting androgynous personality characteristics.

Perhaps most interesting is the considerably greater devaluation of feminine attributes by the adolescent girls than by the adolescent boys. Even among the exceptional twelfth grade girls in the panel study, there was no association of feminine attributes with self-esteem. In addition, girls, but not boys, in the panel group showed a significantly higher correlation between self-efficacy and self-esteem in twelfth grade than in fourth grade. This finding is puzzling given the fairly strong positive associations between relationality and self-esteem reported by their male peers (the high-achieving boys) in both years, and little change in the association between self-efficacy and self-esteem over the time period. This suggests that young, bright, high-achieving women may internalize the cultural devaluation of the feminine to an even greater extent than males with similar characteristics, and for them, unlike their male peers, androgyny does not seem an option. What this means remains open to speculation. At the minimum it suggests that coming of age for young women in postindustrial society brings with it a double bind—a marked devaluation of that which is female, yet being female—which makes it very difficult to feel good about oneself. It is not far-fetched to wonder whether this core conflict may contribute to women's greater vulnerability to the internalizing disorders that emerge (e.g., anorexia, bulimia nervosa) or increase (e.g., major depression) during this developmental period. Recent evidence suggests that poor body image/self-esteem may be a vulnerability factor that sets adolescent girls at greater risk for depression (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990).

Further work in this area seems essential if we are to understand more about the association of sex-typed personality attributes and mental health. It seems especially important to use longitudinal studies, where changes in self-esteem and personality attributes can be observed over long periods of time. Additional measures, both of sex-typed traits (see Gill *et al.*, 1987) and of mental health related characteristics are needed. Particularly needed are scales that more reliably tap sex-typed traits of children and that can be used with both children and adolescents. It is possible that some of the results reported here reflect the relatively low reliability of the children's PAQ with the fourth graders and unknown differences between

the PAQ and CPAQ. Further work should examine this issue. Finally, given that most studies of the relationship between sex-typed attributes and mental health have focused on college-aged people or adults, research that examines other life stages is needed. Studies investigating these associations in old age, a life period in which sex role differentiation diminishes (Stockard & Johnson, 1980), could be informative.

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