

The Impact of Social Roles on Stereotypes of Gay Men

Adam W. Fingerhut · Letitia Anne Peplau

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Abstract Past research demonstrates that heterosexuals perceive gay men to have traditionally feminine characteristics. Guided by Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), we predicted that this stereotype would differ depending on a gay man's specific social role. To test this idea, participants rated five gay targets (father, single man, hairdresser, truck driver, typical gay man) on stereotypically masculine (e.g., ambitious, leader) and feminine (e.g., affectionate, sensitive) personality attributes. Gay men in traditionally masculine roles (truck driver, single man) were rated as less feminine than gay men in traditionally feminine roles (hairdresser, parent). In addition, gay men in feminine roles were perceived as more similar to the typical gay man than were those in masculine roles. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords Stereotypes · Social roles · Gay

Research on stereotypes of gay men has consistently shown that gay men are perceived to be more feminine and less masculine than their heterosexual counterparts (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Madon, 1997; McCreary, 1994; Page & Yee, 1985; Simmons, 1965; Taylor, 1983; Wong, McCreary, Carpenter, Engel, & Korchynsky, 1999). Unfortunately, researchers have focused almost exclusively on impressions of the “typical gay man” and have failed to assess heterosexuals' impressions of a diverse range of gay men. In doing so, researchers have implicitly assumed that heterosexuals think about gay men in monolithic terms. The research presented here, which was guided by Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), was designed to challenge that

assumption and to demonstrate that heterosexuals apply stereotypes differentially depending on the particular social role of the gay man in question.

Previous Research on Stereotypes of Gay Men

In an illustrative study of stereotypes of gay men (Kite & Deaux, 1987), participants evaluated one of four targets: “a heterosexual male,” “a heterosexual female,” “a homosexual male,” or “a homosexual female.” Participants were asked to generate a list of attributes that they thought characterized this type of person and to rate the person on a series of masculine and feminine adjectives. Results showed that, compared to heterosexual men, gay men were seen as less likely to have traditionally masculine physical characteristics, traits, roles, and occupations and more likely to have traditionally feminine physical characteristics, traits, roles, and occupations. Open-ended responses revealed a similar story. Participants perceived gay men as “feminine,” having “feminine qualities,” “feminine mannerisms,” “a high pitched voice,” and a “feminine walk” (p. 88).

Other researchers have found similar patterns. In a study of college students' perceptions of male and female homosexuals (Page & Yee, 1985), male homosexuals were perceived to be more feminine and less masculine than the average adult. Specifically, in comparison to the average adult, participants rated the male homosexual higher on traits such as concern for appearance and need for security and lower on traits such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, and leadership. Madon (1997) similarly demonstrated that heterosexuals perceive gay men as feminine and not as masculine. College participants rated how characteristic each of 75 attributes was of “male homosexuals.” Madon created frequency distributions with these data, and she considered a trait stereotypical if 60% or

A. W. Fingerhut (✉) · L. A. Peplau
Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles,
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563, USA
e-mail: awf@ucla.edu

more of the participants judged it as “somewhat” or “very” characteristic of male homosexuals and if 10% or fewer judged it as “somewhat” or “very” uncharacteristic of male homosexuals. Of the 35 traits classified as stereotypical, the 10 with the highest levels of endorsement were “artsy-looking,” “engages in anal sex,” “activist,” “transvestite,” “open-minded,” “liberal,” “open about feelings,” “feminine,” “sensitive,” and “emotional.” Although not all of these traits relate to femininity, none relate to masculinity, which lends further support to the idea that heterosexuals assume that gay men are feminine but not masculine.

A Single Gay Stereotype?

The results of these stereotype studies seem to suggest that heterosexuals think about most gay men in a similar way, specifically as having feminine characteristics. In reality, however, it seems likely that heterosexuals recognize potential differences among gay men. Two lines of research, one concerning subtypes and one concerning social roles, support the idea that heterosexuals possess nuanced stereotypes of gay men and that they do not think about gay men monolithically.

First, researchers have demonstrated that individuals process information regarding social groups or categories at multiple levels that range from broad to specific. For example, in addition to possessing a global image of women, people also have differentiated views of types of women such as grandmothers, beauty queens, and nuns. In a demonstration of this phenomenon, Clifton, McGrath, and Wick (1976) asked participants to indicate which of 153 adjectives they believed described “the typical housewife,” “the clubwoman,” “the bunny,” “the career woman,” and “the female athlete.” The results showed a general stereotype that reflects the broad social category “women.” At the same time, the subtypes were described differently. For example, the bunny was the only type of woman described by the majority of participants as glamorous, good-looking, pleasure loving, and romantic. The career woman was the only type of woman described by the majority as intelligent, logical, tactful, progressive, and sophisticated.

England (1992) reported a similar pattern for stereotypes of subtypes of men. Participants read a character description of a “family man,” “a business man,” or “a macho man,” and then assessed how this person would respond in a variety of situations. A general stereotype emerged in that all of the subtypes of men were expected to take on family responsibilities and to be the financial provider. Differences among the subtypes emerged as well. The family man was rated as more interpersonally capable than the other types. Both the family man and the business man were rated as more instrumental than the macho man. The work of

England (1992) and Clifton et al. (1976) makes it clear that people can think about social categories at multiple levels of generality and that the assessment of stereotypes only at a global level will fail to capture the whole story.

Currently, only one published article reports an assessment of heterosexuals’ perceptions of gay male subtypes. Clausell and Fiske (2005) examined heterosexuals’ perceptions of feminine qualities related to warmth and masculine qualities related to competence among ten gay male subtypes. The subtypes included “cross-dresser,” “leather/biker,” “feminine,” “flamboyant,” “activist,” “closeted,” “straight acting,” “hyper-masculine,” “artistic,” and “body-conscious.” In contrast to prior research on stereotypes of gay men, this study demonstrated that heterosexuals do not believe that all gay men are feminine. Six of the ten subtypes (activist, closeted, straight-acting, hyper-masculine, artistic, and body-conscious) were rated higher on masculine qualities related to competence than on feminine qualities related to warmth. In addition, cross-dressers and leather/bikers were seen as low in both competence and warmth. Only flamboyant and feminine gay men were rated low in competence and high in warmth.

In addition to the social cognitive research on subtyping, Social Role Theory (SRT; Eagly, 1987) also predicts that heterosexuals should differentiate among gay men. SRT suggests that stereotypes of social groups such as women and men are derived in large part from the roles or jobs that typical group members occupy or have historically occupied. Thus, women are seen as feminine and communal because they have traditionally occupied the homemaker and primary-caregiver roles. From this perspective, gay men might be seen as effeminate and flamboyant because they have been overrepresented in feminine and artistic professions such as hairdresser, dancer, and drag queen. According to SRT, typical stereotypes should not be applied to group members who occupy nontraditional roles. Therefore, women who are lawyers and gay men who are police officers should be perceived differently than typical women or typical gay men, respectively.

Eagly and Steffen (1984, 1988) demonstrated the importance of social role information on impression formation in a series of studies of gender stereotypes. In those studies, undergraduates rated male or female employees or homemakers on a series of adjectives. Some of the adjectives tapped the agentic component of masculinity, which involves self-assertion and independence (Bakan, 1966). Other adjectives tapped the communal component of femininity, which involves concern for others and sensitivity (Bakan, 1966). In support of SRT, both male and female employees were perceived as more agentic and as less communal than homemakers. Thus, a global stereotype was not applied to all women or to all men. Instead, impressions depended on the individual’s social role. To date, no researchers have investi-

gated how heterosexuals' perceptions of gay men are affected by knowledge of their social roles.

The Current Research

The current research was designed to examine how specific social role information impacts impressions of gay men's masculinity and femininity. Based on Social Role Theory, we predicted that heterosexuals' impressions would differ significantly for gay men in different social roles. Specifically, based on SRT and research by Eagly and Steffen (1984, 1988), we predicted that gay men in traditionally feminine roles would be perceived as having more feminine personality attributes and fewer masculine attributes than gay men in traditionally masculine roles. We further predicted that because the typical gay man is perceived as feminine, gay men in feminine roles would be perceived as similar to the typical gay man, whereas gay men in masculine roles would be perceived as different.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Heterosexual undergraduates (70 men, 82 women) from a large university in California completed an impression formation study in exchange for course credit or for a snack. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 years ($M=20.26$, $SD=2.38$) and were ethnically diverse (4% African American, 43% Asian/Asian American, 26% European American, 12% Latino/a, 15% other/missing data).

Procedure

We adapted a methodology (between subjects design) previously used to examine the impact of social roles on heterosexuals' perceptions of lesbian mothers in the workforce (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2004). Participants in the

current study were randomly assigned to read about one of five gay men who differed in their role. Afterward, participants rated the target on a series of masculine and feminine adjectives.

The majority of participants ($N=127$) completed this impression formation task as part of a larger survey on sexuality, which was distributed in a variety of undergraduate psychology courses. A smaller sample ($N=25$) was recruited through the Computer Science Department; these participants completed only the impression formation task and not the longer survey on sexuality.

Materials

Five profiles of gay men were used. All five profiles contained the following information: name (David), sex (male), sexual orientation (homosexual), and residence (California). In the control condition, participants were told simply that the target was a "typical gay man." In the other four conditions information regarding a specific social role was included. We chose social roles that varied in their perceived masculinity and/or femininity (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). Two roles varied in gender stereotypicality: "hairdresser" (feminine) and "truck driver" (masculine). Two additional roles were based on parental status and included "partnered father" (feminine) and "single man" (masculine).

After they read the profile, participants used a 7-point Likert scale to rate the target on a series of adjectives. These included masculine and feminine personality attributes as well as other adjectives included to mask the intent of the study. The masculine and feminine adjectives were chosen based on previous research (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Because of time constraints in survey administration, we were limited in the number of adjectives we could include. Three adjectives that measure masculine personality attributes were included: ambitious, competitive, and leader ($\alpha=0.61$). Three adjectives that measure feminine attributes were included: affectionate, nurturant, and sensitive ($\alpha=0.70$). Separate Masculinity and Femininity scales were created by averaging the ratings for the three items that reflect each construct.

Table 1 Masculinity and femininity scale scores for each gay male target.

	Number	Masculinity scale		Femininity scale	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Typical gay man	34	4.28	0.74	5.04	0.74
Gay hairdresser	25	4.37	1.03	4.83	1.13
Gay truck driver	32	3.23	1.08	4.26	1.17
Gay father	33	4.10	0.91	5.72	0.68
Gay single man	28	4.54	0.85	4.38	0.92

Scores on a 1–7 Likert-type scale; higher scores indicate greater femininity or masculinity.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each target on both the masculinity and femininity scales. To determine whether impressions of gay men varied as a function of their specific social role, univariate ANOVAs that compared all five groups were conducted separately for masculinity and femininity. Results revealed significant differences in perceptions of both masculinity, $F(4,142)=9.74$, $p<0.001$, and femininity, $F(4,147)=12.18$, $p<0.01$. Participant gender had no effect on impressions ($p>0.10$ for both masculinity and femininity) and was therefore not included as a variable in further analyses.

In order to examine more specific differences among gay men in each role, two sets of planned contrast tests were conducted. First, we compared the gay hairdresser with the gay truck driver and the gay father with the gay single man. Second, we compared the typical gay man with each of the other gay men.

Contrasting Gender-typed Occupations: Gay Hairdresser versus Gay Truck Driver

We predicted that the gay hairdresser would be perceived as more feminine and less masculine than the gay truck driver. Planned contrasts revealed that the gay hairdresser was rated significantly higher than the gay truck driver on stereotypically feminine attributes, $t(147)=2.27$, $p<0.05$. However, the gay hairdresser was also rated as more masculine than the truck driver, $t(147)=4.62$, $p<0.001$.

Contrasting Parental Status: Gay Father versus Gay Single Man

We compared the masculinity and femininity ratings for the gay father and gay single man. Based on previous research that showed that participation in family roles such as spouse or parent increases perceptions of femininity and decreases perceptions of masculinity (e.g., Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Etaugh & Stern, 1984), we predicted that the gay father would be perceived as more feminine and as less masculine than the gay single man. Results revealed that the gay father was rated significantly higher on feminine attributes than the gay single man, $t(147)=5.56$, $p<0.001$. Though only marginally significant, the gay father was also rated as less masculine than the single man, $t(147)=1.83$, $p<0.10$.

Typical Gay Man versus Gay Men in Specific Social Roles

We predicted that the typical gay man and the hairdresser, who has a traditionally feminine work role, would be perceived similarly on masculinity and femininity. In order to test this prediction, planned contrasts were conducted

separately for ratings on masculine and feminine adjectives. In line with our prediction, there were no significant differences between the two groups on either measure, $p>0.10$ in both cases. In other words, the typical gay man and the gay hairdresser were perceived similarly on masculinity and femininity.

We predicted that the typical gay man and the truck driver, who has a traditionally masculine work role, would be perceived differently on masculinity and femininity. Specifically, we predicted that the typical gay man would be viewed as more feminine and as less masculine than the gay truck driver. As predicted, the typical gay man was rated significantly higher on feminine attributes, $t(147)=3.38$, $p<0.001$. Contrary to prediction, the typical gay man was also perceived as more masculine than the gay truck driver, $t(147)=4.64$, $p<0.001$.

As mentioned previously, participation in family roles seems to increase perceptions of femininity and to decrease perceptions of masculinity for both male and female targets (Etaugh & Stern, 1984). In other words, those whose family roles are salient are perceived as having more feminine personality characteristics. Consequently, we predicted that the gay father and the typical gay man, who is also perceived as feminine, would be perceived similarly on masculinity and femininity. In order to test this prediction, planned contrasts were conducted separately for masculinity and femininity. In line with our prediction, there were no significant differences between the two groups on masculinity, $p>0.10$. However, the gay father was perceived as more feminine than the typical gay man, $t(147)=2.96$, $p<0.01$.

Finally, we predicted that the typical gay man and the gay single man, who is in a traditionally masculine role, would be perceived differently on masculinity and femininity. Specifically, we predicted that the typical gay man would be viewed as more feminine and as less masculine than the gay single man. As predicted, the typical gay man was rated significantly higher on feminine personality attributes than the gay single man, $t(147)=2.76$, $p<0.01$. Although the typical gay man's mean rating for masculinity was higher than that of the gay single man, the difference between the groups did not reach significance, $p>0.1$.

Discussion

Past research on stereotypes of gay men has consistently demonstrated that heterosexuals perceive gay men to be feminine. This research has been limited, however, by an exclusive focus on the "typical gay man" and by a failure to examine how heterosexuals' impressions are affected by the social roles that gay men occupy. Based on SRT (Eagly, 1987), we predicted that social role information would produce significant differences in impressions of gay men's

masculinity and femininity. Our data confirmed these general predictions.

Our study makes several contributions. First, this research provides support for the idea that heterosexuals do not think about gay men monolithically. With the exception of Clausell and Fiske (2005), all research on stereotypes of gay men has examined stereotypes of the general category “gay men” or “typical gay man.” As such, previous researchers implicitly assumed that there is a single stereotype for gay men that is applied universally. However, Clausell and Fiske’s (2005) study of subtypes and our study on the impact of social role information demonstrate that heterosexuals have more nuanced impressions of gay men. Second, the present study provides a first test of the application of Social Role Theory to gay men. As SRT would predict, participants in our sample possessed a stereotype for the typical gay man, but deferred to other social role information, when it was available, in order to form an impression of a target individual.

One of our most surprising findings was that, contrary to prediction, the gay truck driver was perceived as less masculine than the other gay male targets. This finding most likely reflects the specific items used to assess masculinity, items that largely concerned social status (e.g., competitive, leader). A different operationalization of masculinity, for example, one that focused on physical strength or machismo, would likely have produced the expected result: that gay truck drivers are perceived as more masculine than gay men in the other roles we tested.

This raises an important issue for future research. Our measures of masculinity and femininity were based on the agentic/communal distinction drawn by Bakan (1966) and Eagly and Steffen (1984). However, we know that masculinity and femininity are multidimensional constructs (Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Myers & Gonda, 1982). Future researchers should examine how social role information might affect stereotypes of masculinity and femininity among gay men when different dimensions of masculinity or femininity are assessed. For example, do perceptions of femininity change if submissiveness rather than nurturance is assessed? Do perceptions of masculinity differ if traditionally masculine behaviors or physical attributes are assessed rather than personality attributes? In addition to examinations of these more diverse operationalizations of masculinity and femininity, it is also important to investigate how social role information affects impressions along dimensions unrelated to masculinity and femininity, such as likeability or morality, and along dimensions specific to the social role in question. Finally, because we were limited in the number of adjectives we could include, future research should assess the same predictions using longer, standardized versions of the scales we used.

Finally, this research raises questions about the implications of gay men’s social roles for anti-gay prejudice and discrimination. Some have suggested that heterosexuals’ hostility toward gay men is often fueled by the belief that gay men are gender nonconformists who violate conventional standards of masculine behavior and demeanor (M. R. Laner & R. H. Laner, 1979; Whitley, 2001). If so, do heterosexuals show more positive attitudes and behaviors toward gay men in traditionally masculine roles in society, for example as fraternity members, athletes, truck drivers or physicians? Further, does the social status of gay men’s social roles interact with the perceived masculinity of those roles to affect prejudice and discrimination? At the same time, how do the everyday experiences of gay men differ depending on whether they are involved in social roles that are socially defined as masculine or feminine? These and other questions about the links between role-based stereotypes and anti-gay prejudice await future investigation.

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