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Hyperfemininity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct

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A social control model of rape proposes that there are societal mechanisms including rape in place to maintain the power imbalance between males and females. One of the forces that perpetuates the problem of rape is traditional gender-role socialization. A gender-role model of rape characterizes males as aggressive initiators of sexual activity and women as passive participants. Research has established a link between extreme adherence to a male gender role and experience with sexual aggression; it has been proposed that females learn attitudes about sexuality that might negatively influence their sexual experiences as well, but there is little research to support such a proposal. In the present study, “hyperfeminine” women were hypothesized to indicate particular traditional attitudes and beliefs regarding the rights and roles of women that would have implications for male-female relationships. The development of a scale to measure hyperfemininity is reported, and several studies are presented that provide initial evidence that the Hyperfemininity scale is both valid and reliable. Hyperfemininity was found to be associated with attitudes supportive of a traditional feminine gender role; these attitudes, in turn, were found to be related to adversarial sexual attitudes and traditional feminine achievement ideals. The possible origins of hyperfeminine attitudes and their role in helping to institutionalize the problem of rape are discussed.

According to the social control model of rape, rape serves to maintain the power imbalance between males and females in a patriarchal society; it serves as a form of social control to keep women in an inferior societal position (e.g., Sheffield, 1987). It is further proposed that societal mechanisms like adherence to rape myths (Burt, 1980) and traditional gender-role socialization institutionalize the occurrence of rape. With respect to gender-role socialization, it has been argued that

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such socialization may foster the development of beliefs and expectations conducive to the occurrence of rape (e.g., Check & Malamuth, 1983; Weis & Borges, 1973). In particular, the male gender role is purported to lead to sexual aggression since males are taught to be forceful initiators of sexual activity. Males are expected to control sexual interaction including, if necessary, the use of force to obtain compliance (Zellman & Goodchilds, 1983).

There is some empirical support for the proposed link between adherence to the male gender role and the occurrence of sexual coercion. For example, Koss and colleagues found that self-reported sexually aggressive males could be distinguished from nonaggressive males on the basis of their attitudes; sexually aggressive males were more likely to indicate acceptance of rape-supportive beliefs and to subscribe to an "oversocialized" masculine belief system (Koss, Leonard, Beezley, & Oros, 1985). Similarly, Mosher and Sirkin (1984) developed a scale to measure hypermasculinity or "macho" in males (i.e., adherence to beliefs that violence is manly and danger is exciting and endorsement of calloused sexual attitudes towards women), and it has been found that hypermasculine males are more likely to report engaging in sexually coercive behavior (Mosher & Anderson, 1986) and to indicate a greater future hypothetical likelihood to rape (Smeaton & Byrne, 1987).

The role of the feminine gender role in institutionalizing violence against women has not been investigated to a great extent perhaps because it is problematic to indicate that it is directly related to the occurrence of rape. It is problematic in that it is a form of "victim-blaming" and because it is not validated by empirical research (e.g., Koss, 1985). However, it is proposed that femininity can serve to perpetuate the problem of rape by teaching women to be passive victims of sexual assault (e.g., Cherry, 1983; Murnen, Perot, & Byrne, 1989). Femininity is seen as a necessary but not sufficient mechanism to perpetuate the social control of women (Sheffield, 1987).

The purpose of the present research was to try to determine if there was a dimension of "hyperfemininity" in females. It was argued that in a rape-prone society, some women might learn to view themselves as sexual objects rather than actors, and they might come to view their sexuality as a commodity to use in relationships with men (e.g., Lott, 1987). Hyperfemininity was defined as exaggerated adherence to a stereotypic feminine gender role. It was proposed that the hyperfeminine woman believes that her success is determined by developing and maintaining a relationship with a man and that her primary value in a romantic relationship is her sexuality; hyperfeminine
women use their sexuality to obtain the goal of relationship maintenance. Hyperfeminine women were proposed to hold expectations that men will also uphold their part in a traditional relationship—that of aggressive, sometimes forceful, initiators of sexual activity.

A series of studies was conducted. The purpose of the first study was to determine which scale items represented an internally consistent dimension. The discriminant validity of the scale was also the subject of the first study. It was hypothesized that hyperfemininity would not be related to femininity as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) since content analysis of Bem's scale has revealed that the dimensions measured are primarily positively valued masculine and feminine traits of instrumentality and expressivity, respectively (Spence, 1985). Two other studies were conducted to determine construct validity, to determine whether hyperfemininity was related to a social desirability response set, and to determine the temporal consistency of responses.

STUDY 1: DEVELOPMENT OF THE SCALE

Method

To develop a scale to measure adherence to an exaggerated feminine gender role, a pool of 65 items was created. Items were selected to represent three broad categories of beliefs or behaviors characteristic of the hyperfeminine woman: relationships with men are of primary importance, physical attractiveness and/or sexuality can be "used" to help secure or preserve a romantic relationship, and preference for traditional patterns of sexual behavior in men.

One-hundred and forty-five undergraduate women from the University at Albany, primarily first-year students, participated in the initial item-selection procedure. They fulfilled a requirement for their introductory psychology course in return for research participation. The forced-choice format of the scale is similar to that of the Hypermasculinity Inventory developed by Mosher and Sirkin (1984). Respondents choose one of two statements that is more characteristic of them; one of the statements represents the hyperfeminine choice. Each hyperfeminine choice receives a score of one. Subjects completed a demographic questionnaire, the Hyperfemininity Scale items, and the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974).
### Table 1

**Hyperfemininity Scale**

1. a. These days men and women should each pay for their own expenses on a date.  
   b. Men should always be ready to accept the financial responsibility for a date. *
2. a. I would rather be a famous scientist than a famous fashion model.  
   b. I would rather be a famous fashion model than a famous scientist.*
3. a. I like a man who has some sexual experience.*  
   b. Sexual experience is not a relevant factor in my choice of a male partner.
4. a. Women should never break up a friendship due to interest in the same man.  
   b. Sometimes women have to compete with one another for men.
5. a. I like to play hard-to-get.*  
   b. I don’t like to play games in a relationship.
6. a. I would agree to have sex with a man if I thought I could get him to do what I want. *  
   b. I never use sex as a way to manipulate a man.
7. a. I try to state my sexual needs clearly and concisely.  
   b. I sometimes say “no” but really mean “yes.”*
8. a. I like to flirt with men.*  
   b. I enjoy an interesting conversation with a man.
9. a. I seldom consider a relationship with a man as more important than my friendship with women.  
   b. I have broken dates with female friends when a guy has asked me out.*
10. a. I usually pay for my expenses on a date.  
    b. I expect the men I date to take care of my expenses.*
11. a. Sometimes I cry to influence a man.*  
    b. I prefer to use logical rather than emotional means of persuasion when necessary.
12. a. Men need sex more than women do.*  
    b. In general, there is no difference between the sexual needs of men and women.
13. a. I never use my sexuality to manipulate men.  
    b. I sometimes act sexy to get what I want from a man.*
14. a. I feel anger when men whistle at me.  
    b. I feel a little flattered when men whistle at me.*
15. a. It’s okay for a man to be a little forceful to get sex.*  
    b. Any force used during sex is sexual coercion and should not be tolerated.
16. a. Effeminate men deserve to be ridiculed.*  
    b. So-called effeminate men are very attractive.
17. a. Women who are good at sports probably turn men off.*  
    b. Men like women who are good at sports because of their competence.
18. a. A “real” man is one who can get any woman to have sex with him.*  
    b. Masculinity is not determined by sexual success.
19. a. I would rather be president of the US than the wife of the president.  
    b. I would rather be the wife of the president of the US than the president. *
20. a. Sometimes I care more about my boyfriend’s feelings than my own.*  
    b. It is important to me that I am as satisfied with a relationship as my partner is.
21. a. Most women need a man in their lives.*  
    b. I believe some women lead happy lives without male partners.
22. a. When a man I’m with gets really sexually excited, it’s no use trying to stop him from getting what he wants.*  
    b. Men should be able to control their sexual excitement.
23. a. I like to have a man “wrapped around my finger.”*  
    b. I like relationships in which both partners are equal.

Table 1 continued next page
Table 1 continued

24. a. I try to avoid jealousy in a relationship.
   b. Sometimes women need to make men feel jealous so they will be more appreciative. *

25. a. I sometimes promise to have sex with a man to make sure he stays interested in me.*
   b. I usually state my sexual intentions honestly and openly.

26. a. I like to feel tipsy so I have an excuse to do anything with a man.*
   b. I don't like getting too drunk around a man I don't know very well.

*Indicates the hyperfeminine choice
A point toward hyperfemininity is given for each agreement with the hyperfeminine choice.

Results

Out of the 65 initial items, 26 were selected for inclusion on the final scale. Item analysis was conducted by randomly splitting the sample in half; the 26 scale items that were significantly correlated (p's < .05) with the total score in both halves were retained for the final scale, shown in Table 1. This procedure was engaged so that two different data sets could be constructed: if correlations are statistically significant in both samples, they are less likely the result of Type I error. In the initial study and in subsequent research, it has been found that the mean hyperfemininity score ranges from endorsement of 7 to 9 items, with standard deviations that range from 3 to 5.

The Alpha coefficient of internal consistency of the scale in the initial sample was .76. (In subsequent samples, it was found to be in the low .80's.) A principal components analysis was conducted to try to determine the factor matrix that underlies the 26 items selected for the scale. An unrotated factor structure was used in the analysis since the goal was not to discover an interpretable pattern of factors but rather to determine the complexity of the interrelations among the 26 scale items. The factor analysis indicated that there were 10 factors with eigen values greater than one; the combination of the factors accounted for 63% of the variance. However, it should be noted that all but one of the 26 items (item #20) loaded significantly on the first factor using Stevens' suggestion of critical values for the correlation coefficients (r's > .30; Stevens, 1986, pp. 344-345). About half of the items also loaded significantly on another of the remaining nine factors, but no other factor than the first had more than four items loading on it, and the first factor accounted for more variance than any other single factor. With this information in mind, it is suggested that it is most parsimonious to
consider the scale items as a whole and use a total score rather than separate factor scores.

With respect to an index of the discriminant validity of the scale, it was found that hyperfemininity was not significantly correlated with either femininity or masculinity as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974).

**STUDY 2: PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL COERCION**

**Method**

Seventy-eight women from the University at Albany participated in the second study in return for credit toward their psychology course grade. Students were asked to read a description of a couple (Jill and John) in a dating situation in which sexual coercion occurred. (The type of and means of coercion as well as the relationship between the members of the couple portrayed varied between the scenario conditions but only the results with respect to how hyperfemininity relates to responses to situations overall will be discussed.)

Participants were asked to read the dating description and indicate what they thought the woman should do after being coerced. These responses were later coded by three experimenters on a scale from 1 (least harsh reaction such as “do nothing”) to 7 (most harsh reaction such as report the incident to authorities and end the relationship). (The ratings of the three experimenters were exactly the same on more than 90% of responses. All other ratings differed by an average of less than one point on the scale, and in these cases, an average of the three experimenters' ratings was used.) Additionally, women were asked to rate on seven-point scales how responsible they believed the male was for the incident, how responsible the female was, how coercive they perceived the male to be, and the likelihood that the couple would date again. It was predicted that hyperfeminine women would respond with a less harsh reaction to sexual coercion. Other dimensions were measured to determine correlates of hyperfemininity.

**Results and Discussion**

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to determine how hyperfeminine attitudes were related to responses to the scenarios (regardless of condition). Individual differences in hyperfemininity were related to responses to sexual coercion. Hyperfemininity was negatively correlated with perceptions of how Jill should react to the coercion \( r = -.24, p < .05 \). Hyperfeminine women were more likely to advocate
a less harsh reaction to the episodes. Hyperfemininity was positively related to perceptions of Jill's responsibility for the incident \( r = .20, \ p < .05 \). Hyperfeminine women were more likely to indicate that they felt Jill was responsible for having been sexually coerced by John.

Regarding the correlations between hyperfemininity and other dimensions measured, it was found that hyperfemininity was unrelated to feelings about sex as measured by the Sexual Opinion Survey (Fisher, Byrne, & White, 1983) and self esteem as measured by Rosenberg's (1965) scale. Hyperfemininity was, however, related to Rape Myth Acceptance (Burt, 1980) \( r = .38, \ p < .001 \) and to Locus of Control (Rotter, 1986) \( r = .39, \ p < .001 \), indicating that the hyperfeminine woman was likely to believe rape myths and to report that she expected internal rather than external control of reinforcement. Finally, hyperfemininity was related to the experience of coercion. It was found that hyperfeminine women reported a higher total coercion score calculated from the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982); \( r = .24, \ p < .05 \).

**STUDY 3: CORRELATES OF HYPERFEMININITY, TEST-RETEST RELIABILITY, AND SOCIAL DESIRABILITY**

**Method**

Additional correlates of hyperfemininity were examined next. It was proposed that hyperfemininity would be related to traditional family values (Levinson & Huffman, 1955) and attitudes about the rights and roles of women (Spence & Helmreich, 1972b). It was hypothesized that hyperfeminine women would be more traditional with regard to these variables. It was further suggested that since hyperfeminine women were likely to emphasize their value in terms of their sexuality, they should be less likely to feel that career issues were important. Spence & Helmreich's (1975) Work and Family Orientation scale, comprised of several subscales, was used to determine if hyperfeminine women were less likely to believe career achievement was important. Additionally, women were asked how important they felt their appearance was and how attractive they felt they were rated on seven-point scales. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale was administered (Crowne & Marlowe, 1961) to determine whether hyperfemininity was related to the tendency to report what is considered socially desirable.

Thirty women participated in the correlational study. At Time 1, they filled out half of the scales including the Hyperfemininity Scale. Two weeks later, the women filled out the other half of the scales as well as,
for the second time, the Hyperfemininity Scale. (Data from two women were not included because they did not return for the second part of the study.) Women received credit toward their psychology course grade in return for participation.

Results and Discussion

Correlational analyses were performed to determine the relationship between variables. It was found that hyperfemininity was associated with both social and work-related variables. For example, regarding social-related variables, it was found that hyperfeminine women were more likely to think that marriage was more important than a career \( (r = .33, p < .05) \). Additionally, hyperfeminine women were more likely to have negative attitudes toward women \( (r = -.38, p < .05) \). Regarding the factors on the Work and Family Orientation Questionnaire, hyperfemininity was negatively associated with the rated importance of being job competitive \( (r = -.32, p < .05) \) as well as having a job \( (r = -.22, p < .05) \). The hyperfeminine woman placed greater importance on her spouse having a prestigious and well-paying job, however \( (r = .46, p < .05) \). A significant negative correlation was found between hyperfemininity and social desirability as measured by the Marlowe-Crowne Scale (1961) indicating that it is not socially desirable to choose hyperfeminine responses \( (r = -.46, p < .01) \).

It was suggested that an inverse relationship between hyperfemininity scores and social desirability could be a potential problem for the Hyperfemininity Scale because it might be argued that the relationships between hyperfemininity and other variables that are socially undesirable could merely be due to the fact that people who are willing to indicate hyperfemininity are also willing to respond in other "socially undesirable" ways. We tested this proposal by calculating partial correlations between hyperfemininity and other variables controlling for social desirability. If social desirability accounted for these relationships, partialling it out would result in nonsignificant correlations. Controlling for social desirability affected many of the relationships between variables. Rather than reducing the correlations, however, the associations were markedly enhanced. For instance, the relationship between hyperfemininity and importance of marriage, and between hyperfemininity and attitudes towards women became stronger \( (r = .46, p < .05 \) and \( r = -.7, p < .001 \), respectively). Two additional correlations were significant: there was a relationship between hyperfemininity and appearance controlling for social desirability \( (r = .53, p < .05) \), indicating that hyperfeminine women were
more likely to feel that their appearance was important. A correlation between perceived attractiveness and hyperfemininity \((r = .55, p < .05)\) pointed out that hyperfeminine women reported that they were more physically attractive. Finally, there was found a significant correlation between hyperfeminine attitudes and traditional family ideology \((r = .53, p < .05)\). The relationships that were revealed from partial correlational analysis suggest that social desirability can have a suppressing effect on the relationships between hyperfemininity and other variables related to social desirability.

The study was conducted in two parts so that the Hyperfemininity Scale could be administered to participants twice and scores could be compared. The correlation between hyperfemininity scores at Time 1 and Time 2 was computed; the index of temporal reliability was .89 \((p < .001)\), indicating substantial temporal consistency over this two-week time period.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Research reported in this paper provides initial indication that the Hyperfemininity Scale is both reliable and valid. Scale responses were found to be related to adversarial sexual attitudes and traditional attitudes about the rights and roles of women, as hypothesized. First, the hyperfeminine woman indicated more acceptance of adversarial sexual behavior. She advocated a less harsh reaction to coercion when others were described as involved in adversarial sex, and she has indicated self-blame when she has experienced it herself (Murnen, Perot, & Byrne, 1988). She suggested a willingness to endorse rape myths as well. There also was found a small correlation between hyperfemininity scores and reported experience with sexual coercion such that hyperfeminine women indicated more experience with adversarial sexual episodes. Although one cannot determine the causal nature of these associations, it is hypothesized that hyperfeminine beliefs might develop in some women through experience with adversarial heterosexual relationships as a way to perceive that one has control over men and such relationships by using one's sexuality—that which is deemed the important characteristic of women in such relationships. This interpretation is supported by the relationship between hyperfeminine responses and an internal locus of control.

In addition to attitudes about sexuality, hyperfemininity was related to traditional attitudes about the rights and roles of women in society. Hyperfeminine women reported more negative attitudes about women and more traditional family attitudes. They indicated that they believed
marriage was more important than a career, although it was deemed important for a potential spouse to have an economically successful, prestigious job. Further, job competitiveness and job concern were negatively related to hyperfemininity scores.

Future research will explore the prevalence of hyperfeminine attitudes and how such attitudes develop. It seems important to determine the causal nature of the relationships between hyperfemininity, experience with, and attitudes about adversarial sexuality in heterosexual relationships. In feminist analyses of heterosexual relationships, it has been argued that men are dominant since society gives them power to be that way. It might be the case that women who experience adversarial relationships develop attitudes during the course of these relationships (i.e., hyperfeminine attitudes) because they are part of the institutionalized system that dominates them; these attitudes might inhibit their situation from changing (e.g., Sheffield, 1987). It is argued that it might be helpful to try to change hyperfeminine attitudes themselves (e.g., through exposure to feminist attitudes); but ultimately it would be the social structure that maintains an unequal power balance between women and men that would need to change before sexual equality in heterosexual relationships would be the norm.

References


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