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Concepts of Masculinity among Federal  
Prison Inmates<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Fifty-nine inmates at the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, in Springfield, Missouri were administered a questionnaire and the Bem Sex-Role Inventory to determine their attitudes, beliefs, and self-reported behavior concerning the male sex role and masculinity. Based on past studies, it was hypothesized that difficulty with male role might be a causal factor in criminal behavior. Although there was wide discrepancy between inmates, comparisons of results with college students and a national survey revealed that federal prison inmates have attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors similar to the population at large, especially with social class and education taken into account. Results of the study did not support the initial hypothesis that male role conflicts were responsible for criminal behavior.

## Concepts of Masculinity among Federal Prison Inmates

The current interest in the effects of sex-roles on various aspects of behavior has generated research on such topics as attribution of mental illness (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel, 1972; Stockburger and Davis, 1978), vocational choice (Vetter, Stockburger, and Brose, 1976), and fear of success (Horner, 1972). While the women's movement has spurred much theoretical and applied work on the effects of sex-roles on women, very little has been focused on men and masculinity. This current work is an attempt to study the possible relationships between difficulties with the male sex-role and criminal behavior.

The male sex role is a pattern of behaviors which a given individual in a specified (set of) situation(s) which is both: (1) expected and (2) encouraged and/or trained to perform (David and Brannon, 1976). In most cases the expected pattern of behaviors is only generally proscribed for any given situation. For example, a provocation in a bar by another man may be successfully met by a number of different behavior patterns; aggression, humor, or ignoring the act, but not by crying. By examining the expected behavior patterns over different situations a few commonalities or dimensions of the role begin to appear.

These dimensions include; (1) an abhorrence of anything considered feminine, (2) a willingness to resort to physical violence if necessary, (3) control over emotions, especially emotions which might reveal weakness, and (4) a need to succeed at something. While no one man can successfully fulfill all of these dimensions every minute of the day, most men can successfully adopt parts of the male role to their individual psyche and

live fairly comfortably within the role. Some men, however, find the role so incongruous with their own personality that they must either redefine themselves as men or take drastic steps to insure that no person will question their masculinity.

It is with the latter possibility that the male sex-role may link with criminal behavior. Men, failing to meet the expectations of the role within the boundaries of legal behavior, may resort to criminal behavior in order to see themselves as "real" men. The similarities between criminal behavior and the extremes of the various dimensions of the male sex-role make this a viable hypothesis. For example, the willingness to engage in physical violence, if taken to extremes, may result in assaults or rape; a need to succeed may lead a man into criminal activities if avenues for success have been cut off within legal bounds. If this hypothesis is correct, then it would be expected that men labeled as criminals should exhibit more difficulty with the male sex-role than those who are not so labeled.

The difficulty with the male role could take one of two forms. First, the sex-role expectations, or ideal man, could be so far removed from reality that meeting the role requirements would be impossible. Secondly, if the sex-role expectation is realistic, then the perceived performance of the role might be seen as inadequate. In either form this difficulty would manifest itself in large discrepancies between the ideal man and the perceived self image.

The relationship between crime and masculinity has been explored by a few researchers. Silverman and Dinitz (1974) have examined the relationship between delinquency and compulsive masculinity. From a sociological perspective, compulsive masculinity results from a mother-dominated household

which has negative consequences for male development because it creates anxiety about maleness. The result is antisocial and aggressive conduct. Silverman and Dinitz (1974) examined measures of manliness, toughness, impulsiveness, hostility, and compulsive masculinity for 284 boys from age fourteen to nineteen. Breaking these measures down by type of household, they found that boys from mother-based households tended to score higher on measure of masculinity than those from father-based households. They concluded that their findings supported the thesis that a mother-based home generates problems of compulsive masculinity, which in turn promote anti-social and aggressive conduct.

Based on thirty-five years of experience in criminal rehabilitation, including being warden of San Quentin prison, Clinton Duffy (1965) argues that it is a rare crime that can't be traced to some sort of sexual inadequacy. He feels that 90% of the criminals in prison are there because they were unable to come to grips with sexual tensions, doubts, fantasies, anxieties, and hungers. If the term sex-role replaced Duffy's use of the word sex, his position would be easier to defend and more in line with the hypothesis of this paper.

#### Methods

##### Participants

The participants were 59 male inmates at the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, Springfield, Missouri. Included in the sample were 41 sentenced inmates who either worked at the prison or were sent there for medical reasons and 18 unsentenced inmates sent for observation and testing.

##### Stimuli and Apparatus

The stimuli consisted of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BEM), the Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS), The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory

(MMPI), the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF), and a nine-page questionnaire called the General Information Survey (GIS). Parts of the questionnaire appeared in the February, 1976 issue of Psychology Today.

The Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) is a sixty-item checklist of adjectives, 20 of which were empirically determined to be masculine, 20 to be feminine, and 20 to be neutral (also called social desirability). The inventory is completed by checking a six-point scale labeled from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). A masculine, feminine, and neutral score is computed by taking the average of all the respective items.

The SSS (Zuckerman, 1964) was included as a measure of need for stimulation. It is a twenty-six item test where a choice must be made between two statements for each item. The higher the score, the greater the need for sensation-seeking.

#### Procedure

All participants were given the MMPI as part of the regular testing program at the institution. The unsentenced inmates were also given the 16 PF as part of the same program. At the completion of the regular testing program participants were asked if they would fill out some additional tests and a questionnaire for research purposes. They were told that names and numbers were not to be given and that the information would neither be placed in their files nor given to the administration. If the inmate refused, as about 25% did, they were politely dismissed and were not required to fill out a refusal to test form for their files as they would have to do if they refused the regular testing program.

All willing participants were individually instructed about the additional testing when they finished the regular testing. They were first

given a BEM scale and asked to fill it out as it applied to themselves. This procedure was repeated two more times with instructions to describe their ideal man and then their ideal woman on the form. Following that the SSS scale and the GIS questionnaires were given. The additional testing and questionnaire took about an hour to complete. All questions about the questionnaire were answered by the examiner.

### Hypotheses

A number of specific predictions were made based on the hypothesis that criminal behavior was related to difficulties with the male sex role:

- 1) Inmates should exhibit extreme stereotyped concepts as to the ideal sex-role of each sex.
- 2) The differences between the ideal man and self-ratings on the masculine scale should be greater for inmates than college students.
- 3) Attitudes toward sex-roles and sensation-seeking, should be related to presence or absence of both parents (type of household.)
- 4) Inmates should show more difficulty with the male sex-role than the national sample.

### Results

The results are broken down into two sections. The first compares the results of the BEM Sex-role Inventories taken by the inmates with the results of two other studies, sampling college students and police officers. The second section compares the results of the GIS with results of a nationwide mail survey. While the samples were very different and comparisons must be made with a great deal of caution, some interesting and useful information may be gleaned from the results.

BEM Sex-Role Inventory

Results of the BEM Sex-Role Inventory which asked the inmates to describe their ideal man and ideal woman are presented in Table 1. Comparison of the inmate's responses with the two college groups used by Bem (1974) to standardize the instrument revealed little if any differences.

Comparison of the BEM self-rating results for the inmates with those obtained for the BEM (1974) groups (Table 2) again showed similar patterns. Comparison of self-ratings with a "masculine" male group consisting of police officers and a "feminine" female group consisting of housewives (Gaudreau, 1975), however, revealed that these groups differed markedly from the prison sample.

The conclusion reached from these results is that prison inmates in a federal prison do not hold overly masculine concepts of the male role or overly feminine concepts of the feminine role in our society. In addition, their concept of their own role is similar to that of college students and is neither overly masculine nor overly feminine.

In order to test the compulsive masculinity hypothesis, the BEM results were broken down by the presence or absence of both parents during different ages in the life of the inmate (0-6, 7-12, 13-18), which parent he felt closer to during each period, and which parent was more dominant. Little or no differences were found for any of the variables. No significant differences were discovered and of the 37 ANOVA's performed, only 7 had F-ratios above 1.00 and none of those were greater than 1.60. These results would seem to indicate that, for adult federal prisoners, the presence of a single parent (mother) or both parents during any period of childhood or adolescence does not affect the self-reported concepts of masculinity and femininity.

General Information Survey

While not all of the results of the survey will be examined in detail, some of the results of this questionnaire will be compared to a national mail survey conducted by Psychology Today (Travis, 1977), in which over 28,000 individuals responded.

The respondents to this questionnaire were not typical because they were younger, more affluent, less religious, better educated, and more liberal than the average American. A comparison of the national sample with the prison sample on a number of demographic variables, Table 3, revealed that the prison sample was older, less likely to be married for the first time, much less educated, more moderate in political views, somewhat more religious, and had about the same level of income the year before prison. These differences would lead to the expectation that the prison sample would have more sex-role stereotyped responses than the national sample.

The sexual preferences of the inmates appeared to closely approximate the sexual preferences of the national sample (Table 4). While the majority of men (68%) said that they were heterosexual, somewhere around thirty percent in each sample responded that they were homosexual, bisexual, or had had some homosexual experience.

A comparison of the concept of the ideal man and the ideal woman for a number of different character traits is presented in Table 5. Compared with the male respondents to the national survey, inmates generally described the ideal man as somewhat more traditionally masculine, i.e., physically strong, aggressive, and with many sexual conquests, and less traditionally feminine, i.e., able to cry, warm and gentle. The description of the ideal

woman, however, exhibited exactly the same kind of differences. That is, the inmates described the ideal woman with greater emphasis on traditionally masculine traits, i.e., physically strong, aggressive, and with many sexual conquests, than the national sample and less emphasis on traditionally feminine traits. The differences between the two samples may be less a difference in concepts of sex-roles than a difference in ideas about the character traits of the ideal person.

The differences found in Table 6, dealing with the manner in which the individual would handle a potentially violent situation, also illustrates the willingness to use physical force by the inmates. Inmates were more likely to say that they would respond by hitting than by talking to, arguing with, or ignoring the threatening individual. Whether or not this can be viewed as a symptom of an exaggerated sense of masculinity or as a means of coping with a particular life situation (prison) remains to be determined.

#### Discussion

The comparisons of the prison sample with both the college samples and the national sample revealed that the prisoners did not conceptualize the male or female sex-role in an overly stereotyped manner. These results were not as predicted by the compulsive masculinity hypothesis and were contrary to hypotheses presented earlier in the paper.

The predictions that the number and type of parents during childhood and adolescence would affect sex-role concepts was also not confirmed. Accepting a hypothesis of no difference, which is not statistically correct, appears justified in this case. The conclusion reached by this study is that federal prisoners do not appear to have any greater or less difficulty with the male sex role than men in the general population.

These results may not be generalizable to all criminal offenders. The federal prisoner may be considered the "elite" of the prison system. Many of the prisoners are there for crimes other than assault or other physically violent crimes. The federal prisoner is generally better educated, had a higher income, and had more status in the community than state or local prisoners. It may be possible that similar results would not be found for other types of inmates.

It may have been possible that the data collection instruments, especially the BEM Sex-Role Inventory, may not have been powerful enough to detect differences. While not excluding that possibility, significant differences were found between the college sample and the police officer sample in other studies, such that the sensitivity of the instrument does not appear to be in question.

A second possible confounding factor was the fact that only self-reported behavior was collected. In order to verify these results, an analysis of actual behavior would be useful. The results of this study would indicate that a study of the willingness to use physical force in response to threatening situations may be a useful place to begin.

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Table 1

Comparison of the Masculine and Feminine  
 Items on the BEM Sex-Role Inventory for  
 Inmates and College Students  
 for the Ideal Man and Ideal Woman

	<u>BEM (1974) judges</u>		<u>INMATES</u>
	<u>Female Judges</u>	<u>Male Judges</u>	
For a Man			
Masculine Items	5.83	5.59	5.53
Feminine Items	3.74	3.63	4.89
Neutral Items	3.94	4.00	4.65
For a Woman			
Masculine Items	3.46	2.90	4.68
Feminine Items	5.55	5.61	5.52
Neutral Items	3.98	4.08	4.65

Table 2  
 Comparison of Self-Ratings on the  
 BEM Sex-Role Inventory

	BEM (1974)		Gaudreau (1975)	Present Study
	<u>Stanford</u>	<u>Foothill Jr. College</u>	<u>Police Officers</u>	<u>Inmates</u>
Male				
N	444	117	36	59
Masculine Items	4.97	4.96	5.70	5.07
Feminine Items		4.62	4.30	4.64
Female				
N	279	77	<u>housewives</u> 36	
Masculine Items	4.57	4.55	4.40	
Feminine Items	5.01	5.08	5.40	

Table 3

Comparison of Demographic Variables for the  
Prison Sample and Travis (1977) Sample

Age	Travis (1977)		Prison
	Women	Men	
Under 20	21	12	3
21-25	31	29	20
26-30	20	23	27
31-35	11	14	17
36-45	11	12	19
over 45	6	10	5
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Never Married	49	52	31
Married first time	27	30	27
Remarried	7	6	17
Divorced, widowed	17	12	24
<b>Education</b>			
Professional & degree	16	25	3
Some Grade School	10	12	0
College Degree	19	20	5
Some College	39	32	34
High school or less	16	11	58
<b>Political views</b>			
Very liberal	27	25	19
Liberal	37	31	19
Moderate	25	26	44
Conservative	10	14	10
Very conservative	1	4	3
<b>Religion</b>			
Atheist, agnostic	25	31	14
Protestant	36	30	49
Catholic	21	22	17
Jewish	6	6	0
Other	12	11	14
<b>Income (personal - year before prison)</b>			
none	16	6	7
less than 50000	29	22	24
5000-9999	25	19	27
10,000-14,999	19	19	15
15,000-19,999	7	16	14
20,000-29,000	3	12	7
more than 30,000	1	6	5

Table 4

Sexual Preference of the Two Samples

<u>Preference</u>	<u>Travis (1977)</u>	<u>Inmates</u>
	%	%
Heterosexual	68	68
Some Homosexual Experience	18	22
Bisexual	6	5
Homosexual	5	5

Table 5

## Traits of Ideal Man and Ideal Woman for Two Samples

Percent saying trait is "very important" or "essential" to ideal

	<u>IDEAL MAN</u>			<u>IDEAL WOMAN</u>		
	<u>Travis (1977)</u>		<u>Inmates</u>	<u>Travis (1977)</u>		<u>Inmates</u>
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>		<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	
Intelligent	84	71	66	83	70	63
Tall	11	7	7	2	4	3
Physically strong	21	19	27	7	4	14
Physically attractive	29	26	23	32	47	37
Able to cry	51	40	17	58	50	32
Successful at work	66	54	65	60	41	41
Romantic	66	48	48	67	64	66
Self-confident	86	86	71	87	76	58
Loves children	*	*	66	*	*	73
Aggressive	28	30	53	21	16	39
Warm	89	68	54	88	83	68
Soft	48	28	28	62	63	56
Takes risks	25	34	25	26	21	20
Sexually faithful	67	42	41	66	56	54
Competitive	27	38	51	22	18	31
Gentle	86	64	54	86	79	59
Stands up for beliefs	92	87	70	90	82	58
Skilled lover	48	38	49	44	41	48
Being a father (mother)	*	*	54	*	*	68
Many sexual conquests	4	5	27	5	4	24
Able to love	96	88	76	97	92	76
Willing to fight to protect his family	72	77	84	70	72	80

\*Results not available

Table 6

Manner of Dealing with Potentially Violent Situations

When a man provokes you and makes you very angry, what are you most likely to do?

	Travis (1977)	Inmates
Hit him	8	19
Threaten to hit him	8	5
Argue with him	45	22
Make a joke of it	3	3
Ignore him	24	32
Leave the scene	10	17

If a strange man deliverately accosted or insluted your wife or lover, what would you most likely do?

	Travis (1977)	Inmates
Hit him	19	53
Threaten to hit him	18	12
Argue with him	31	8
Make a joke of it	5	3
Ignore him	13	8
Let the woman handle the matter	9	2
Leave the scene	5	12

**END**