

Confirming Gender Stereotypes: A Social Role Perspective

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In this research we examined whether emotional vulnerability leads women and men to confirm gender stereotypes. Emotional vulnerability is a state where one is open to having one's feelings hurt or to experiencing rejection. Drawing on the tenets of social role theory and research related to normative expectations, we propose that emotional vulnerability leads to stereotype confirmation, as normative expectations are less risky and easier to enact than nonnormative behavior. Fifty-nine dating couples were randomly assigned to a high emotional vulnerability or low emotional vulnerability discussion with their partners. When the degree of emotional vulnerability was high men confirmed gender-stereotypes. Women's behavior, on the other hand, was not significantly affected by condition. We discuss these findings in terms of the domain in which gender-typed behaviors occur and the social pressures to act in accordance with gender norms.

KEY WORDS: gender; stereotypes; social role theory; couples.

Popular culture has embraced the idea that women and men are different. Self-help books, talk shows, and magazine articles routinely acknowledge large gender differences, identify how these differences interfere with intimacy, and offer solutions about how individuals may overcome these differences in order to develop more fulfilling romantic relationships (e.g., Gray, 1992). The scientific literature, in contrast, suggests that gender differences may not be as large as popular culture suggests. Meta-analytic reviews that report average differences between the sexes indicate that women and men behave similarly over 98% of the time (Canary & Hause, 1993; Wilkins & Anderson, 1991). However, when differences do occur, they often map onto gender stereotypes with women behaving in traditionally feminine ways and with men behaving in traditionally masculine ways. These differences, although small, are important be-

cause they may emerge more strongly under some conditions and less strongly under others. In the current research we examined whether women and men involved in romantic relationships are more likely to confirm gender stereotypes when they feel emotionally vulnerable.

Gender Differences

Are women and men really different? Early research on gender differences addressed this question by comparing women and men along a variety of behavioral and attitudinal dimensions. A particularly interesting conclusion of this literature is that when women and men exhibit differences, those differences fit stereotypic expectations (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). For example, women are better at sending and decoding nonverbal messages (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 2000), are more expressive of certain emotions (Manstead, 1998), and are more concerned about maintaining intimacy in their close relationships than are men (Christensen, 1987, 1988). Men, in contrast, are better at controlling their nonverbal expressions (Brody, 1996; Brody & Hall, 2000), are more instrumental or

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task-oriented (Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999; Walters, Stuhlmacher, & Meyer, 1998), and are more concerned about maintaining autonomy in their close relationships than are women (Christensen, 1987, 1988). Findings such as these have sparked considerable interest in identifying the processes that are responsible for gender-typed differences between the sexes and the conditions under which such differences occur.

Social Role Theory

Social role theory is among the most influential explanations for why gender stereotypes are confirmed (Eagly, 1987). Social role theory proposes that one reason women and men confirm gender stereotypes is because they act in accordance with their social roles, which are often segregated along gender lines (Eagly, 1987). As such, women and men behave in gender-typed ways because the social roles that they perform are associated with different expectations and require different skills. For example, because women are caregivers for children and aging parents more often than are men, they more frequently exhibit traditionally feminine behaviors such as nurturance and a concern over personal relationships. Men, in contrast, who are more likely to work outside of the home, more frequently exhibit traditionally masculine behaviors such as assertiveness and leadership qualities. According to social role theory, therefore, women and men confirm gender stereotypes in large part because the different roles that they perform place different social demands upon them.

Importance of Gender Differences

Given the pervasiveness of social roles in society, one might expect gender-typed differences between women and men to be large. Contrary to this assumption, however, meta-analyses indicate that women and men behave similarly much of the time (Canary & Hause, 1993; Wilkins & Anderson, 1991). Moreover, when women and men do behave differently, the magnitude of those differences are relatively small in terms of effect sizes (Hyde & Plant, 1995). However, because effect sizes are averages, they do not take into account moderating variables. Under certain conditions, the magnitude of gender-typed behaviors may be larger or smaller than average effect sizes indicate.

To determine the conditions under which gender differences are especially large, researchers have begun to examine moderators that operate during

social interactions. This research has identified a number of important moderating variables. For example, gender differences in helping behavior are potentiated by the presence of an audience or when requests for help require agentic qualities, such as an assertive action (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Similarly, tasks that require communal qualities, such as interpersonal skills, undermine men's tendency to emerge as group leaders (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Within personal relationships, women and men are more likely to confirm gender stereotypes when they discuss conflicts in their relationships (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995) or when they discuss emotional topics (Vogel, Tucker, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999). Thus, situational factors influence the extent to which women and men confirm gender stereotypes.

Social Role Theory and Romantic Relationships

Most research on moderators of gender stereotype confirmation processes has focused on participants who were not well acquainted. Conversely, much less is known about the conditions that lead women and men to confirm gender stereotypes within their close relationships (for exceptions see Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). Yet, confirming gender stereotypes within one's close relationships can have important and far-reaching consequences. It can influence a couple's ability to communicate effectively and affect the longevity of their relationship (Tannen, 1990). In the current research we examined the effect of a moderating variable that is particularly relevant to close relationships: emotional vulnerability. Emotional vulnerability is defined here as being a state where one is open to having one's feelings hurt or to experiencing rejection. When people express their feelings to others they have an increased chance of being hurt, rejected, or ignored. Thus, emotional vulnerability is an aversive state. Emotional vulnerability may be particularly important within the context of romantic relationships because people want to maintain the relationship, have their needs met, and avoid being hurt by their partners (e.g., Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Peplau & Gordon, 1985; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Vogel, Tucker, et al., 1999).

We propose that emotional vulnerability causes people involved in close romantic relationships to adhere to gender roles, a behavioral strategy that ultimately causes women and men to behave consistently with gender stereotypes. Consistent with social

role theory, gender roles are normative expectations (Eagly & Wood, 1991). They are learned at an early age, represent consensually shared beliefs, manifest themselves across a wide variety of contexts, and are socially sanctioned (Deaux, 1985; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Saarni, 1997). Research suggests that normative expectations guide people's behavior when they are in emotionally aversive, difficult, or ambiguous situations (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Festinger, 1954; Saarni, 1997). One reason this may occur is because behaving consistently with normative expectations is less risky than behaving in a nonnormative manner. Indeed, people are often punished when they behave nonnormatively (e.g., Hibbard & Buhrmester, 1998).

Second, behaving consistently with normative expectations may also be easier than behaving in a nonnormative manner. According to social role theory, the social roles performed by individual women and men shape and define their skills over time. "Women and men seek to accommodate sex-typical roles by acquiring the specific skills and resources linked to successful role performance and by adapting their social behavior to role requirements" (Eagly & Wood, 1999, p. 412). Relying on overlearned behaviors such as those associated with gender roles may be the default when people feel emotionally vulnerable because those roles require the least amount of cognitive effort. Accordingly, women and men who feel emotionally vulnerable may behave consistently with gender roles because it is less risky and easier than behaving nonnormatively.

Hypothesis and Overview of Current Research

In this research we attempt to understand the stereotype confirmation process by examining whether emotional vulnerability moderates the extent to which women and men confirm gender stereotypes. Because previous research relevant to social role theory has most often tested its predictions with participants who were not well acquainted, we chose to focus on those who were involved in a close romantic relationship. Drawing on the tenets of social role theory, we predicted that women and men would more strongly confirm gender stereotypes when they feel emotionally vulnerable.

We assessed dating couples' behaviors along the following dimensions: emotional expressiveness, emotional restriction, demand behaviors, and withdrawal behaviors. We selected these behavioral dimensions because past research indicates that they

reflect stereotypic expectations about women and men. For example, women more often than men are thought to express their emotions freely, discuss relationship problems, and request changes in their relationships (Christensen, 1987, 1988; Heesacker et al., 1999; Thomas, 1996). Conversely, men more often than women are thought to show restricted affect and to withdraw from negative or difficult issues (Heesacker et al., 1999; O'Neal, 1990; Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999). If emotional vulnerability does cause people to confirm gender stereotypes, as social role theory suggests it should, then the dating couples who discussed an emotionally difficult topic should engage in gender-typed behaviors more than the dating couples who discussed an emotionally easy topic.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-nine heterosexual dating couples participated in this study. The couples were recruited from psychology classes at a large university in the Southeastern United States. Student participants received extra credit in their psychology class for their and their partners' participation. Female participants ranged in age from 17 to 25 years ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 1.77$). Male participants ranged in age from 17 to 27 years ($M = 20.3$, $SD = 2.17$). The average length of the dating relationship was 18.5 months ($SD = 22.4$). Participants were predominantly European American (96%; African American = 2%; Asian American = 1%; Other = 1%).

Experimental Design and Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (emotional vulnerability: low or high) \times 2 (sex: female or male) mixed-model design with repeated measures on the second factor. Emotional vulnerability was manipulated by having each dating couple discuss an emotional topic that both members of the couple perceived as either easy ($n = 19$) or difficult ($n = 20$) to talk about with their partner. The particular topic that each couple discussed was determined on the basis of their responses to the Difficulty of Relationship Issues Questionnaire (DRIQ; Vogel, Wester, et al., 1999).

The DRIQ (Vogel, Tucker, et al., 1999; Vogel, Wester, et al., 1999) included items that assess the

perceived difficulty of discussing eight different emotional topics with a partner (e.g., “needs in the relationship” or “your feelings about your partner”). Participants indicated their responses to these items on a 9-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (*very emotionally easy to talk about*) to 9 (*very emotionally difficult to talk about*). Scores less than 4 reflect the perception that a topic is easy to discuss with one’s partner, whereas scores equal to or greater than 4 reflect the perception that a topic is difficult to discuss with one’s partner. Topics that both partners rated as a 3 or less were considered emotionally easy, whereas topics that both partners rated the topic as a 4 or higher were considered emotionally difficult. In addition, an independent rater, blind to the experimental condition, viewed 25% of the tapes and rated them on a 9-point Likert-type scale regarding how emotionally vulnerable each member of the dating couple appeared to be during the interaction.

Dependent Variables

There were four dependent variables that reflected how demanding, withdrawing, emotionally expressive, and emotionally restricted each member of the dating couple was perceived to be, on average, by the research assistants while they were discussing the emotional topic. Higher values reflect the perception that the participant was more demanding, withdrawing, emotionally expressive, and emotionally restricted.

Global Rating System

Global rating systems are based on overall perceptions about another person’s behavior after observing an interaction. Global rating systems are sometimes preferred over frequency counts in behavioral coding because they incorporate additional information such as intensity and duration in addition to frequency (Weiss & Tolman, 1990). Therefore, we used a global rating system to measure the four dependent behaviors relevant to gender stereotypes: demand behaviors, withdrawal behaviors, emotional expressiveness, and emotional restriction. The rating system used to measure demand and withdrawal behaviors was first developed by Klinetob and Smith (1995), and it has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure by several researchers (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, Bates, & Vogel, 1993; Klinetob & Smith, 1995; Vogel & Karney, 2002). Prior

research indicates that observational codes based on this rating system correlate with self-report measures (Klinetob & Smith, 1995) and other coding systems (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1993) and are sensitive to variability in behavior among partners in less established relationships (Vogel & Karney, 2002). The global rating system used to measure expressiveness and restricted affect was developed for the current study using the same scale and procedures as those developed by Klinetob and Smith (1995). The Appendix presents examples and operational definitions for each gender-typed behavior measured in our research.

Four research assistants (two women and two men) received 6 weeks of training (approximately 30 hr) in the use of this global rating system prior to observing the videotapes. The training consisted of viewing and rating a series of videotapes from a different study of dating couples and discussing the coding system until acceptable interrater reliability was achieved for each behavioral dimension ($\alpha = .87$, see Christensen & Heavey, 1990). This training followed standard training procedures used in past research in which global rating systems have been employed (e.g., Heavey et al., 1995; Roberts & Krokoff, 1990).

After completing the training, the research assistants, who were blind to the experimental conditions, used this global rating system independently to code the current study’s dating couples’ behavior along the four gender-typed behaviors (i.e., emotional expressiveness, emotional restriction, demand behaviors, and withdrawal behaviors). The procedures employed were similar to those outlined by Klinetob and Smith (1995). Specifically, each research assistant provided an overall rating of each participant’s behavior on the four gender-typed behaviors after watching the couple’s complete interaction. The four research assistants each rated all of the participants. The interrater reliability of the research assistants’ overall ratings of the four gender-typed behaviors ranged from moderate (.76) to very high (.98) in terms of Cronbach’s alpha, and were moderately high on average (.88). Thus, we averaged across the four research assistants’ ratings to obtain four scores per participant, one for each of the gender-typed behaviors under investigation.

In addition, two research assistants (one woman and one man) examined 25% of the videotaped discussions and counted the frequency with which each participant engaged in the four gender-typed behaviors. We then correlated these frequency measures with the ratings obtained with the global rating system

for this subset of videotapes. The correlations between these alternative coding systems were all significant (demand, $r(37) = .89, p < .01$; withdraw, $r(37) = .81, p < .01$; expressiveness, $r(37) = .74, p < .02$; restrictive affect, $r(37) = .71, p < .03$), which suggests that the global rating system that we employed incorporated frequency. However, we chose to use the global rating system over frequencies because the former is also designed to tap intensity and duration, which are important characteristics of communicative patterns.

Procedure

Upon arriving at the laboratory, each dating couple signed a consent form and was informed that the study was voluntary, included videotaping, and was aimed at examining communication patterns within dating relationships. They were also told that their responses would be kept confidential. Each member of the dating couple independently completed the DRIQ. Upon completion of this questionnaire, each dating couple discussed the assigned emotional topic from the DRIQ. All of the discussions were videotaped. After discussing the emotional topic, the couples were debriefed and dismissed.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

The purpose of our research was to examine whether emotional vulnerability increases a couple’s tendency to confirm gender stereotypes. We operationalized emotional vulnerability as the perceived difficulty of discussing an emotional topic with one’s partner. Difficult topics were expected to have elicited greater emotional vulnerability than easy topics. To examine the effectiveness of this manipulation we performed an independent samples *t*-test on the perceptions of an independent rater. The rater, who was blind to experimental condition, perceived couples who discussed an emotionally easy topic as less emotionally vulnerable ($M = 4.20, SD = 1.48$) than those who discussed an emotionally difficult topic ($M = 8.60, SD = 3.51$), $t(8) = 2.58, p < .04$.

Main Analyses

Does emotional vulnerability cause women and men to confirm gender stereotypes? We examined this question with a series of 2 (emotional vulnerability:

Table I. Means and Standard Deviations for the Four Gender-Stereotyped Behaviors

	Women		Men		Couple	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Emotional expression						
Difficult	4.04	1.52	3.50	1.52	3.77	1.48
Easy	4.71	1.44	4.85	1.28	4.79	1.25
Restricted affect						
Difficult	2.14	0.88	3.02	1.18	2.58	0.88
Easy	2.16	1.05	1.93	0.77	2.07	0.68
Demand						
Difficult	3.63	1.92	2.60	1.63	3.12	1.62
Easy	1.95	1.08	1.61	0.69	1.78	0.72
Withdrawal						
Difficult	2.32	0.95	3.44	1.43	2.88	1.06
Easy	2.54	1.13	2.33	1.25	2.43	0.94

Note. Range from 1 to 7 with higher scores reflecting greater prevalence of that behavior.

low difficulty or high difficulty) × 2 (sex: female or male) mixed-model analysis of variance procedures, with the second factor as the within subject variable. Because the behavioral observations of the women and men were nonindependent, which can inflate *p* values if “person” is the unit in the analysis (Kenny, 1995), the couple served as the unit of analysis in all statistical analyses. The dependent variables in these analyses were the global ratings that reflected the participants’ emotional expressiveness, emotional restriction, withdrawal, and demand behaviors. Results would support the hypothesis that emotional vulnerability increases people’s tendency to confirm gender stereotypes if there were a significant interaction between topic difficulty and participant sex. That is, the behavior of dating couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic should converge, whereas the behavior of dating couples assigned to discuss an emotionally difficult topic should diverge in a manner consistent with gender stereotypes. The following sections describe the results from each of these analyses. Table I details the pattern of means separately for each analysis. Table II shows the correlations between the four dependent variables for women and men.

Emotional Expression

This analysis examined the degree of emotional expression of the dating couples during their interaction. The analysis produced a significant main effect for topic difficulty, $F(1, 37) = 5.34, p < .03$. Dating couples who discussed an emotionally difficult topic were less emotionally expressive ($M = 7.50$)

Table II. Intercorrelations Between the Four Gender-Stereotyped Behaviors for Women and Men

	Women				Men			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional expression	—				—			
2. Restricted affect	-.07	—			-.08	—		
3. Demand	.34*	.07	—		.26*	.24	—	
4. Withdrawal	-.14	.69***	-.08	—	-.21	.69***	-.08	—

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

than dating couples who discussed an emotionally easy topic ($M = 9.56$). The analysis did not produce a main effect for sex, $F(1, 37) = 2.57$, $p > .10$. Women's ($M = 8.75$) and men's ($M = 8.35$) emotional expressiveness did not differ significantly. However, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction between sex and topic difficulty, $F(1, 37) = 7.38$, $p < .02$. Planned pair-wise comparisons that explored this interaction confirmed the hypothesis that emotional vulnerability led women and men to confirm gender stereotypes. Specifically, among couples assigned to discuss an emotionally difficult topic, women exhibited significantly more emotional expression ($M = 4.04$) than men ($M = 3.5$), $t(37) = 3.07$, $p < .01$, whereas, among couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic, women's ($M = 4.71$) and men's ($M = 4.85$) emotional expressiveness converged such that they did not differ significantly, $t(37) = 1.08$, $p > .20$.

Restricted Affect

This analysis examined how emotionally restricted the dating couples behaved during their interaction. There was a nearly significant main effect for topic difficulty such that couples assigned to discuss an emotionally difficult topic showed more restricted affect ($M = 5.16$) than did dating couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic ($M = 4.09$), $F(1, 37) = 4.00$, $p = .053$. There was also a marginally significant main effect for sex $F(1, 37) = 3.43$, $p = .07$. Women ($M = 4.30$) exhibited less emotional restriction than men ($M = 4.95$) during the interaction. In addition, as was the case with emotional expressiveness, these effects were qualified by a significant interaction between topic difficulty and sex, $F(1, 37) = 7.38$, $p < .02$. Planned pair-wise comparisons revealed that among couples assigned to discuss an emotion-

ally difficult topic, men ($M = 3.02$) exhibited more restricted affect than women did ($M = 2.14$), $t(37) = 3.39$, $p < .01$. No such differences emerged among dating couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic, $t(37) = 0.63$, $p > .20$. In this condition, women ($M = 2.16$) and men ($M = 1.93$) exhibited similar levels of restricted affect.

Withdrawal Behaviors

This analysis examined the extent to which the dating couples exhibited withdrawal behaviors during their interaction. Unlike the previous findings, there was no main effect for topic difficulty. Couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic exhibited levels of withdrawal ($M = 4.87$) similar to those couples assigned to discuss an emotionally difficult topic ($M = 5.76$). In addition, there was a significant main effect for sex, $F(1, 37) = 4.53$, $p < .05$. Women ($M = 4.86$) exhibited significantly fewer withdrawal behaviors than did men ($M = 5.77$). However, as in the previous analyses, there was a significant interaction between topic difficulty and sex that fit the predicted pattern, $F(1, 37) = 9.72$, $p < .01$. Planned pair-wise comparisons revealed that among couples assigned to discuss an emotionally difficult topic, women ($M = 2.32$) exhibited fewer withdrawal behaviors than men did ($M = 3.44$), $t(37) = 3.77$, $p < .001$, whereas no differences were found between women ($M = 2.54$) and men ($M = 2.33$) among couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic, $t(37) = 1.00$, $p > .20$.

Demand Behaviors

This analysis examined the extent to which dating couples exhibited demand behaviors during their interaction. Results yielded main effects for both topic difficulty, $F(1, 37) = 10.86$, $p < .01$, and sex, $F(1, 37) = 10.90$, $p < .01$. Couples assigned to discuss an emotionally easy topic showed fewer demanding behaviors ($M = 3.56$) than couples assigned to discuss an emotionally difficult topic ($M = 6.23$), and women showed more demanding behaviors ($M = 3.63$) than men did ($M = 2.60$). However, contrary to the prediction that emotional vulnerability causes people to confirm gender stereotypes, there was not a significant interaction between topic difficulty and sex, $F(1, 37) = 2.73$, $p > .10$. Rather, across the experimental conditions of topic difficulty, women and men did not differ in their exhibition of demanding behaviors.

Confirming Gender Stereotypes

Three of four of our findings are consistent with the hypothesis that emotional vulnerability increases a couple's tendency to confirm gender stereotypes. However, an examination of the means (see Table I) suggests that this tendency may have been stronger among men than women. That is, it appears that the significant interaction between topic difficulty and sex reflects differences in the behavior of men. Women's behavior appears more stable by comparison. To examine this possibility more closely, we performed additional comparisons that examined the simple effect of topic difficulty on men's and women's emotional expressiveness, emotional restriction, and withdrawal. We did not examine the simple effect of topic difficulty on the couple's demand behaviors because no significant interaction between topic difficulty and sex emerged for this behavior.

The comparisons confirmed our suspicions. Men's behavior across the emotionally difficult and easy topic conditions differed significantly for all the three behaviors. Men expressed less emotion while discussing an emotionally difficult topic ($M = 3.50$) than an emotionally easy topic ($M = 4.85$), $t(37) = 2.17$, $p < .05$, exhibited more restricted affect while discussing an emotionally difficult topic ($M = 3.02$) than an emotionally easy topic ($M = 1.93$), $t(37) = 3.04$, $p < .01$, and engaged in more withdrawal behavior while discussing an emotionally difficult topic ($M = 3.44$) than an emotionally easy topic ($M = 2.33$), $t(37) = 2.45$, $p < .02$. A different pattern occurred among women. In no case did women's behavior differ significantly across the emotionally difficult and easy topic conditions, all $ps > .20$. Taken together, these results suggest that the tendency for the couples to diverge in gender-typed ways while discussing an emotionally difficult topic was predominantly due to men's divergence from women.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research was to examine whether emotional vulnerability leads women and men to confirm gender stereotypes. Drawing on the tenets of social role theory (Eagly, 1987), we proposed that couples involved in a close romantic relationship would lessen their emotional vulnerability by exhibiting socially sanctioned and overlearned behaviors that are consistent with gender stereotypes. Our initial results were generally consistent with this prediction. The

behaviors of heterosexual dating couples diverged in gender-typed ways when they discussed an emotionally difficult topic, but not when they discussed an emotionally easy topic. However, further analyses revealed that this pattern primarily characterized the behavior of men. Men exhibited fewer emotionally expressive behaviors, more emotionally restrictive behaviors, and more withdrawal behaviors when they discussed an emotionally difficult topic with their partner than when they discussed an emotionally easy topic. Women's behavior, in contrast, remained relatively stable across conditions.

Although not initially expected, these findings are not without precedent. For example, men have been shown to modify the emotional content of their speech more than women do (Shimanoff, 1983). Husbands while speaking with their wives tend to adopt a female-preferential linguistic style, however, wives do not adopt a male-preferential linguistic style while speaking with their husbands (Fitzpatrick, Mulac, & Dindia, 1995). And, men reduce their "emotional" behaviors and diverge from "feminine" behaviors in emotionally charged or intimate situations (e.g., Levant & Pollack, 1995; Vogel, Tucker, et al., 1999).

Why do men's behaviors appear more situationally determined than do women's? We suspect that the domain in which gender-typed behaviors are often examined may be an important contributing factor. In each of the examples cited above, as well as in current study, women's and men's behavior was examined in terms of traditional verbal emotionality, a domain typically associated with women. The skills and behaviors associated with the verbal expression of emotionality in general are not consistently associated with men's social roles, and thus may be less familiar and ingrained for men, despite the lack of innate affective differences between women and men (see Wester, Vogel, Pressly, & Heesacker, 2002, for a review). It is not that men have "problems with emotions" (Scher, 1993, p. 295) or are "unable to feel emotionally alive" (Brooks & Gilbert, 1995, p. 260). Rather, the social sanctions men face for violating social roles is high (see Brooks & Good, 2001a, 2001b, for reviews) and accordingly, they are more sensitive than women to situational demands. In contrast, women may have substantially more experience in domains associated with the verbal expression of emotion precisely because of the social roles they perform. The more experience one has with a domain, the better equipped a person may be to exhibit behavioral stability, even when under stress.

Had we investigated the gender stereotype confirmation processes in the context of a masculine domain (e.g., an instrumental or task-oriented discussion), we may have found the reverse pattern, in which men show greater behavioral stability than women do. For example, studies of newlyweds (e.g., Vogel & Karney, 2002) have shown that during problem-solving discussions wives more than husbands alter their behavior in line with gender stereotypes. This may be due to the fact that focusing on finding solutions to a problem is an agentic quality requiring a task-orientation that men are comfortable with. Thus, confirmation of gender stereotypes may partly depend on the domain under investigation.

Social Pressures

It is also possible that emotional vulnerability elicited greater gender-typed behaviors from men than women because of social pressures placed on women. Just as men experience a social pressure not to express their emotions, women typically feel greater social pressure to express their emotions. For example, Stoppard and Gruchy (1993) found that women believe that others will evaluate them negatively if they do not freely express emotion, whereas men do not expect negative evaluation in such circumstances. The pressure women may feel to express their emotion may be particularly strong in domains associated with verbal emotional expression, such as the kind used in the present study. Thus, a second reason that women's behavior may have been more stable across conditions of emotional vulnerability may be because women felt greater social pressure than did their partners to express their emotions across both experimental conditions. Men, on the other hand, may have felt much freer to inhibit their emotions, especially when they felt emotionally vulnerable, as they did not feel the same pressure to express emotions (Stoppard & Gruchy, 1993). In fact, men may feel the opposite pressure that they need to withhold emotion in order not to appear weak or feminine (Levant & Pollock, 1995). Men report expectations of needing to be emotionally in control, logical, and independent (Good & Wood, 1995).

Limitations

There are several limitations to our research that qualify the insights that it provides. One limitation is that we used only a single method of measurement

(i.e., behavioral observation). Although several direct behavioral observations were used and found to be reliable, it is entirely possible that self-report data or other behavioral dimensions might have yielded different results. For example, self-reports of emotional expressivity in women and men tend to be more robust than is generally found in observational studies (Wester et al., 2002). A second limitation of the current investigation is that the results may not generalize beyond couples in newly established relationships. This is particularly important given recent evidence that engaged couples (who are more established than the couples in our research) show fewer gender differences than male-female friends in conversations do (Markman, Silvern, Clements, & Kraft-Hanak, 1993). In addition, certain gender-relevant behaviors have been shown to be less ingrained in dating partners than in married couples (Vogel, Wester, et al., 1999). Whether processes similar to those we found would emerge in longer-term and more established relationships is clearly an important issue for future research to address. Finally, given that the majority of the sample was European American, the degree to which these results are reflective of ethnic minority or biracial couples is less clear. Women and men from different backgrounds may have learned different normative expectations regarding gender appropriate behavior. Future research may assess the impact of emotional vulnerability on non-European-American couples.

Conclusion

Dating couples behaviorally diverged in gender-typed ways when they discussed an emotionally difficult topic, but not when they discussed an emotionally easy topic. However, further analyses revealed that this pattern primarily characterized men's behavior. These findings support the idea that women and men behave similarly much of the time, but there may be critical times in which they diverge in gender-stereotyped ways. Thus, confirmation of stereotypes appears to be a dynamic process (e.g., Deaux & Major, 1987; Fitzpatrick et al., 1995; Ickes, Gesn, & Graham, 2000; Smith, Noll, & Bryant, 1999) that is dependent on specific contextual factors such as emotional vulnerability. This possibility underscores the need to understand the specific and complex contextual factors involved in the ongoing enactment of gender roles (Deaux & LaFrance, 1997) and the importance of continuing to shift the focus from simply descriptive (i.e.,

how much women and men differ) to an understanding of how and when gender effects occur (Shields, 2000).

APPENDIX

Emotional expression was defined for the coders as “Talking about and/or acknowledging feelings whether positive or negative.” Examples given to the coders were using feeling terms, reflectivity, openness, sharing, statements such as “I am feeling X,” and self-disclosures.

Restricted affect was defined as “Avoiding talking about one’s feelings or a refusal to deal with the feelings of the other.” Examples given to the coders were denying feelings, intellectualizing, insensitivity, not responding to others’ expression of emotion, negating others’ feelings, holding back when expression of emotion is appropriate, and not expressing emotion when it is clear they are feeling happy, sad, angry, etc.

Demanding was defined as “Pursuing a change in the others’ behavior or any attempt to engage the other in a discussion of a relationship issue with the intent of making a direct or indirect request for a change in behavior.” Examples given to coders were direct statements expressing a specific desire for change “I want you to do X,” indirect statements asking implicitly for a change “You know you do not do enough of X,” making specific requests, and expression of own suffering without specifically blaming the partner “You know I always have to do X.”

Withdrawal was defined as “Actively avoiding discussing the current issue regardless of the topic.” Examples given to the coders of avoidance were changing the topic of discussion, negation of the issue, refusing to recognize the topic, using distracters, giving excuses, abrupt cut off of the possibility of talking about the issue further, statement clearly communicating the desire to end the conversation, and general defensiveness.

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