

The Power of Words: Gendered Language in Attachment Measures

Lynda R. Ross,
Centre for Work and Community Studies,
Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, T9S 3A3

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ABSTRACT

Concurrent with the proliferation of research in adult attachment are concerns about the measurement of the attachment construct. Given traditional gender differences in relationship socialization practices, studies focussed on gender and attachment have been remarkably absent. 224 introductory psychology students responded to a survey containing 6 different attachment measures. Separate multivariate analysis of variance were used to evaluate mean gender differences across attachment sub-scales. Significant gender differences were evident in sub-scales from each of the attachment measures. A smaller independent sample evaluated the gendered language of 60 phrases taken from 3 attachment measures. Participants rated each item in terms of masculinity-femininity on a 7-point scale. A series of one-sample t-tests against a fixed mid-point indicated significant variation away from neutral in rating items as either masculine or feminine. Consistent with notions of masculinity (e.g., dismissing, uncomfortable with relationships) and femininity (e.g., preoccupied, need for approval), males and females frequently endorsed items in stereotypical ways. Attachment scale phrases were also rated in gender stereotypical ways. Results are discussed in terms of gender bias inherent in the language used to construct attachment scales and its impact on scale validity.

INTRODUCTION

Although few gender differences have been articulated in the attachment literature, differences in the socialization practices of boys and girls suggests gender as a potentially important construct underlying attachment security. With notable exceptions, particularly in relation to gender differences found in dismissive attachment tendencies (e.g., Feeney, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Schmitt et al., 2003), generally investigation into the role gender plays in adult attachment has been limited. Paradoxically, there is a vast body of evidence highlighting relational differences between men and women in areas that seem as if they should be relevant to the attachment construct (Wood & Dindia, 1997). For example, gender differences have been noted in relation to expressing intimacy (Reis, 1998; Wright, 1998); in verbal (Acitelli, 1992; Johnson, 1996; Macoby, 1990) and nonverbal communication patterns (Gottman & Carrere, 1994; Dindia & Allen, 1992); and in empathy and care-taking behaviour (Shibley Hyde, 2005; Wood, 1994). Over three decades ago Broverman and colleagues (1972) brought attention to the fact that positive adult mental health is stereotypically associated with masculine traits; whereas the feminine sex role is associated with poorer mental health (Feather, 1985; Widiger & Spitzer, 1991). And certainly individuals who have a secure attachment style are thought to be in better mental health than those classified with insecure styles. Current research also indicates that masculine traits are often associated with positive self-worth. Although not identical constructs, self-worth does make a contribution to defining various attachment styles. According to Bartholomew's (1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) four prototype model, individuals defined by a secure attachment style are those who experience few serious interpersonal problems and are described as comfortable with and trusting of both themselves and their relationship partners. From the self-esteem literature, studies assessing the relationship between gender and self-esteem show that even when men and women appear to be highly similar in their

reported global self-esteem, often self-worth is drawn from different competency domains (Knox, Funk, Elliot, & Bush, 2000). Not surprisingly, women rate themselves higher on their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships, and on their moral virtue; while men rate themselves higher on persuasiveness, dominance, capacity to withstand stress, and giftedness (Stake, 1992) – traits that have more to do with the self than with others. These domains are related to notions of dependence and independence in relationships which are, in term, central concepts in the measurement of the attachment construct.

HYPOTHESES

Study 1: Males will score significantly higher on items reflecting independence; whereas females will score significantly higher on items reflecting inter-dependence.

Study 2 (Pilot): Phrases describing aspects of independence are expected to be rated as more masculine; whereas phrases describing aspects of inter-dependence are expected to be rated as more feminine.

STUDY 1

METHODS

Sample

- N=224 (36% Male; 64% Female)
- Mean age = 20 years (SD = 3.5 years).

Procedure

- Following ethical approval, standard procedures used to recruit participants from introductory psychology classes;
- Participants given course credit for their involvement; and
- Questionnaire completed in a one large group session (45 minutes).

Measures

In addition to other measures, not included in this study, participants completed the following:

- The Reciprocal Attachment Questionnaire for Adults (RAQ: West & Sheldon-Keller, 1994)
- The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994)
- Relationship Scale Questionnaire (RSQ: Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994)
- Relationship Questionnaire (RQ-Global: Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)
- Relationship Questionnaire (RQ-Specific: Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991)
- Attachment and Object Relations Inventory (AORI: Buelow, McClain, & McIntosh, 1996).

RESULTS

A series of MANOVA's were executed to assess gender differences in response to a series of different attachment measures.

Table 1: Mean RAQ sub-scale scores by gender

Sub-scale	Male (N=79)		Female (N = 140)		F _(1,217)
	M	SD	M	SD	
proximity seeking	2.5	1.0	3.2	1.0	21.2***
separation protest	1.8	.7	1.9	.9	.8
feared loss	2.0	1.1	1.8	1.0	2.9
available responsiveness	1.8	.8	1.6	.7	2.0
use of attachment figure	4.0	.9	4.5	.7	17.4***

Note: Multivariate F_(5,213) = 6.26; p < .001. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 2: Mean ASQ sub-scale scores by gender

Sub-scale	Male (N=81)		Female (N = 142)		F _(1,221)
	M	SD	M	SD	
confidence in relationships	4.4	.7	4.4	.7	.1
discomfort with relationships	3.3	.7	3.2	.9	1.1
relationships as secondary	2.6	.7	2.2	.7	14.8***
need for approval	3.1	.7	3.4	.8	5.6*
preoccupation with relationships	3.2	.8	3.5	.8	7.0**

Note: Multivariate F_(5,217) = 5.24; p < .001. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 3: Mean RSQ sub-scale scores by gender

Sub-scale	Male (N=80)		Female (N = 139)		F _(1,217)
	M	SD	M	SD	
secure	3.5	.6	3.4	.6	.1
fearful	2.6	.8	2.6	.8	.9
preoccupied	2.8	.7	3.1	.7	5.6*
dismissing	3.3	.6	3.1	.6	7.4**

Note: Multivariate F_(4,214) = 2.65; p < .05. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 4: Mean RQ (Global) ratings by gender

Sub-scale	Male (N=80)		Female (N = 143)		F _(1,221)
	M	SD	M	SD	
secure	3.5	1.1	3.7	1.1	1.9
fearful	2.6	1.3	2.5	1.3	.2
preoccupied	2.4	1.2	2.6	1.2	1.3
dismissing	3.3	1.3	2.7	1.2	12.5***

Note: Multivariate F_(4,218) = 3.42; p < .01. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 5: Mean RQ (Specific) ratings by gender

Sub-scale	Male (N=81)		Female (N = 143)		F _(1,222)
	M	SD	M	SD	
secure	4.2	1	4.4	0.9	4.3*
fearful	1.9	1.2	1.8	1.3	0.3
preoccupied	2.1	1.3	2.2	1.4	0.3
dismissing	2.7	1.3	2.4	1.3	1.8

Note: Multivariate F_(4,219) = 2.42; p > .05. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 6: Mean AORI sub-scale scores by gender

Sub-scale	Male (N=74)		Female (N = 130)		F _(1,202)
	M	SD	M	SD	
peers as emotionally accessible	3.9	.5	4.0	.5	1.6
parents as emotionally accessible	4.3	.7	4.3	1.0	.1
partners as emotionally accessible	3.7	.7	3.9	.9	1.34
self as not anxious in relationships	3.5	.6	3.2	.6	11.6***
self as independent in relationships	3.9	.6	3.6	.6	8.3**
self as warm, close, affectionate in relationships	3.6	.7	3.8	.7	2.1

Note: Multivariate F_(6,197) = 5.71; p < .001. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the first hypothesis, male scores were significantly lower on measures assessing proximity seeking, use of attachment figures, need for approval, and preoccupation with relationships; and significantly higher on scores assessing relationships as secondary, dismissive tendencies (both generally but not within specific relationships), confidence (less anxiety) and independence, compared to females. These results suggest parallels between attachment dimensions and social prescriptions defining masculinity and femininity.

STUDY 2 (PILOT)

METHODS

A small sample of faculty and graduate students rated gender content (scale 1 -7, where 1 = highly masculine; 7 = highly feminine) of 60 phrases drawn from 3 different attachment measures.

RESULTS

Phrases representing various scales were combined and mean scores computed. Mean scores were compared, using a series of one-sample t-tests, to a fixed neutral point.

Table 7: *Mean masculinity/femininity ratings by attachment sub-scales*

Description	M	SD	t
ASQ: Feeney et al., 1994			
need for approval	4.4	0.4	2.4
relationships as secondary	2.7	0.6	-5.3**
preoccupation with relationships	4.8	0.5	4.1**
confidence with relationships	4.2	0.2	2.3
discomfort with relationships	3.7	0.3	-2.5*
RSQ: Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991			
secure	4.5	0.3	4.8**
fearful	3.5	0.3	-3.4*
preoccupied	5.3	0.6	5.3**
dismissing	3	0.7	-3.6*
AAI: Main et al., 1985			
secure	4.6	0.4	4.0**
preoccupied	4.7	0.5	3.2*
dismissing	3.6	0.3	-4.0*

Notes. Scales range 1-7, lower scores reflect masculinity, higher scores reflect femininity; one-sample t-tests against a fixed value of 4 (i.e. neutral scale point). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the second hypothesis, phrases describing aspects of independence, making up sub-scales related to relationships as secondary, discomfort with relationships, dismissing characteristics from two different measures were significantly rated as more masculine. Conversely, phrases describing aspects of inter-dependence making up sub-scales related to preoccupation, fearfulness and security were significantly rated as being more feminine.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Tentatively, the results of these two studies suggest significant parallels between attachment dimensions and social prescriptions defining masculinity and femininity. Speculatively, these associations lend support to the idea that measurement of aspects of the attachment construct are partially reflections of the ways in which masculinity and femininity have been socially constructed. Shibley Hyde (2007) suggests the need to look at gender, not just as an individual difference or person variable, but as a social-stimulus variable. From this perspective, the gendered nature of the phrases used to assess attachment tendencies, in concert with social/cultural prescriptions defining masculinity and femininity, might unduly influence participant responses to attachment measures. If this is the case, claims finding males as more independent and females more inter-dependent in their attachment relationships might then be more an artifact of measurement and/or of the social constructions of gender rather than a true reflection of significant aspects of attachment relevant cognitions.

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