

# Masculinity and Femininity: Do Sex, Race, and Social Class Matter?

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## ABSTRACT

Little empirical research explores the intersections of sex, race, and social class. In the current study, we expected to find that participants would rate Black men highest in masculinity and White women highest in femininity, and working class males would be seen to have higher levels of masculinity and middle/upper class women would be seen to have higher levels of femininity. Two hundred and three participants responded to a scenario where three independent variables were manipulated in the portrayal of the individual: race (Black or White), social class (working or middle/upper), and sex (male or female). Participants then rated the individual in the scenario using adjectives from the Bem Sex Role Inventory to assess masculinity and femininity. Black individuals were rated more masculine than White individuals. Men were rated more masculine than women. There was a sex and social class interaction where middle/upper class men were rated highest overall in masculinity. Women were rated higher in femininity than men and a sex and social class interaction was found indicating that middle/upper class women were rated highest overall in femininity. The findings suggest that working class individuals are seen as more balanced in femininity and masculinity than are middle/upper class individuals who represent more extreme notions of femininity for women and masculinity for men.

## INTRODUCTION

Human cognition reflects a remarkable ability to process large amounts of information as well as an ability for complex thought and problem solving. However, in order to process large amounts of information, human thought is also marked by a need to quickly categorize information (Myers, 2003). Research suggests that three primary categories are used when assessing the physical characteristics of someone new – sex, race, and age (Zebrowitz, 1997). Each category is associated with stereotypes (Nelson, 2002); however, since individuals fall into more than one category variation in stereotypes should exist. But, stereotypes tend to be based on perceptions of White, middle class individuals (Niemann, O'Connor, & McClorie, 1998). In the past several decades, both the political and academic analysis of gender and racial oppression has asserted that race, gender and class are inextricably interlinked (Rothenberg, 2003). The current study explored the relationship between race and class in terms of gender stereotypes.

### *Gender Stereotypes*

In general, there is strong agreement cross-culturally on stereotypes of men and women. Men are seen as active and aggressive; whereas women are seen as nurturing and caring (Williams & Best, 1982). Psychological research has explored stereotypes of sex categories (male and female) as well as perceptions of the characteristics of femininity and masculinity. The term femininity refers to the characteristics associated with the female gender. Some characteristics attributed to females include “compassionate,” “love children,” and “tender” (Hoffman & Borders, 2001). Conversely, the term masculinity refers to characteristics associated with the male gender. Such characteristics attributed to males according to the Bem Sex-Role Inventory include “assertive,” “strong personality,” and “aggressive” (Hoffman & Borders, 2001). Originally, masculinity and femininity was conceived of as a one-dimensional trait, meaning if an individual was high on one characteristic, it suggested that they were low on the other. For example, if an individual had high levels of masculinity, he or she must have low levels of femininity. However, more recent research on masculinity and femininity suggests a two-dimensional measure is more accurate. Thus, an individual can be high or low on both dimensions simultaneously (Lorr & Manning, 1978). Based on this, sex-typed individuals are those who display either high levels of masculinity or high levels of femininity. Non-sex-typed individuals are those who display either high levels of both masculinity and femininity (androgynous) or low levels of both masculinity and femininity (undifferentiated) (Spence, 1993). Sex stereotypes directly correspond to perceptions of masculinity and femininity as societal expectations directly influence gender norms, while gender identification leads sex-typed men and women to adopt certain behaviors and attitudes reflecting societal standards (Spence, 1993).

### *Defining Race and Class*

As argued above, race, sex, and class are viewed as interwoven. Researchers often categorize social class into five main categories: poor, working class, middle class, the upper-middle class, and upper class (Argyle, 1994). Traditionally, social class is seen as a variable associated with occupations, income, and education; however, social class can also include other cultural characteristics such as appearance, accents, friends, or a neighborhood in which one lives (Argyle, 1994).

Definitions of race vary, and even today, some scholars take more of a biological approach believing race consists of three major categories, while some other scholars take more of a social approach suggesting that race consists of as many as thirty-seven different distinctions (Matsumoto, 2000). Race is often referred to as a social construct; though, it is a concept which is difficult to describe. For the purpose of this study, race will be defined as differing physical characteristics which determine an individual's group membership (Schaefer, 2000). In the United States the traditional racial and ethnic categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau are American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic (non-white), White, or the most recent addition, Two or More Races (US Census Bureau, 2000).

### *Gender, Race, and Social Class Variations*

Niemann, O'Connor, and McClorie (1998) focused on the perceptions of in-groups and out-groups in relation to races and concluded based on their findings that Whites demonstrated the "out-group homogeneity effect," while Blacks were more "multi-dimensional" concerning both groups. The "out-group homogeneity effect" is the concept of labeling individuals perceived as belonging to one's in-group as more complex than those who belong to the out-group, whereas, the out-group is perceived to be more similar to each other, or homogenous. These findings suggest that Whites attribute more stereotypes to Blacks than they do to other Whites. Bryson (1998) investigated the interaction of race and negative stereotypes of Black men by having both Whites and Blacks rate Black men on an attitude scale. Their findings showed that the majority of both Whites and Blacks disagreed with the items portraying negative stereotypes of Black men. However, on 11 particular items such as statements that "Black men are usually harder to get along with" and "Black men are sentenced to longer jail terms than other groups," a larger percentage of Whites, in comparison to Blacks, agreed with more negative statements about Black men (Bryson, 1998). This finding demonstrates that stereotypes can vary by race and how race can impact perceptions, especially pertaining to individuals belonging to an out-group.

Lott and Saxon (2002) investigated the effects of ethnicity and social class on initial impressions of women in two separate, but related, studies. Both studies used scenarios that manipulated ethnicity and occupation as a proxy for social class. In both studies, social class had more of an impact on impressions than ethnicity; however, both variables were influential (Lott & Saxon). This supports the idea that social class does influence first impressions and the development of negative stereotypes, while also taking into consideration the influence of ethnicity. In addition to looking at race and social class, a study by Landrine (1985) added ratings of femininity to these variables. By examining ratings of both middle and lower class Black and White females, Landrine found that stereotypes of White women and middle class women resembled stereotypical roles traditionally attributed to women. However, despite race and social class differences, overall the stereotypes attributed to women in this study were considered feminine.

The current study combined the exploration of sex, race, and social class on perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Our hypotheses were:

1. In terms of race, we expected participants to rate Black men highest in masculinity and White women highest in femininity.
2. In terms of social class, we expected to find lower class males to have higher ratings of masculinity and middle/upper class women to have higher ratings of femininity.
3. Furthermore, we expected an interaction such that Black, lower class men will be perceived as the most masculine; whereas, White, middle/upper class women will be perceived as the most feminine.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

Two hundred and three undergraduate European-American female undergraduates from the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse participated in this study for extra credit. The ages of our participants ranged from 18 to 22. Participants read and signed an informed consent prior to the study. Participants responded to a scenario where three independent variables were manipulated in the portrayal of the individual: race (Black or White), social class (working or middle/upper), and gender (male or female) (See Table 1). Participants then rated the individual in the

scenario using adjectives from the Bem Sex Role Inventory to assess masculinity and femininity. Included in these adjectives was our dependent variable of interest – a rating of the individual on masculinity and femininity. As shown in the Appendix, we described an individual in enough detail to involve the reader – the individual’s job, likes/dislikes and personality were described. Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight scenarios and then completed the questionnaire and demographic page. Along with the scenario, all participants rated the individual in the scenario on three statements measuring appropriateness.

**Table 1:** Scenario

*Please read the following description – after you read it we will be asking you to rate Jordan on a series of dimensions.*

Jordan is a **black/white** male/female who has been working as a **doctor/custodian** in a local hospital/high school for several years. He/She enjoys his/her job and gets along well with his/her co-workers. Jordan likes helping others and he/she feels lucky that his/her job allows him/her to do so. Jordan drives a **silver BMW/blue Ford Escort** and can often be caught singing along with **rap/country** music on the radio at high volume. In his/her spare time, Jordan enjoys spending time with his/her nieces and nephews who live in a neighboring town. He/She also enjoys going to a local park to walk and play fetch with Sammy his/her golden retriever. On weekends Jordan likes to go out to eat for a Friday fish fry and listen to live music with friends. Jordan also enjoys watching action movies with friends. Jordan takes care of the garden, mows the lawn, hauls wood, and cleans the gutters. He/She also does many tasks inside the house, including cooking, doing the dishes, doing the laundry, and cleaning. Jordan also enjoys planning new projects, like remodeling the kitchen, adding on to his/her house, and building a new deck. He/She enjoys reading in his/her spare time, and tries to read the books from which movies have been filmed first so He/She doesn’t feel cheated by just watching the movie. To alleviate stress and relax Jordan swims laps and plays soccer.

- : Sex manipulations
- : Race manipulations
- : Social class manipulations

## RESULTS

When the dependent variable was the masculinity rating, Black individuals were rated more masculine than White individuals ( $F = 9.10, p < .01$ ). Although not significant, there was a trend in the hypothesized direction such that Black men were rated higher in masculinity than White men. As expected, men were rated more masculine than women ( $F = 30.18, p < .001$ ). Table 2 provides the means and standard deviations. As shown in Figure 1, there was a sex and social class interaction ( $F = 5.05, p < .05$ ). Middle/upper class men were rated highest overall in masculinity. These results contradict our hypothesis which predicted that Black, lower class men will be perceived as the most masculine. When the dependent variable was the rating on femininity, as expected, women were rated higher in than men ( $F = 41.76, p < .05$ ). As expected and shown in Figure 2, a sex and social class interaction was found ( $F = 4.75, p < .05$ ) indicating that middle/upper class women were rated highest overall in femininity; thus supporting our second hypothesis related to women. In terms of the appropriateness statements, no significant findings resulted for any individual in the scenario regardless of sex, race, and social class.

Table 2

	Men		Women	
	Black	White	Black	White
Masculinity				
<i>M</i>		4.29	3.31***	
<i>SD</i>		1.15	1.34	
<i>M</i>	4.62	3.94	3.49	3.17
<i>SD</i>	0.81	1.35	1.41	1.27
Femininity				
<i>M</i>		2.58	3.63***	
<i>SD</i>		1.23	1.08	
<i>M</i>	2.55	2.62	3.84	3.44
<i>SD</i>	1.29	1.18	1.24	0.88

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 1

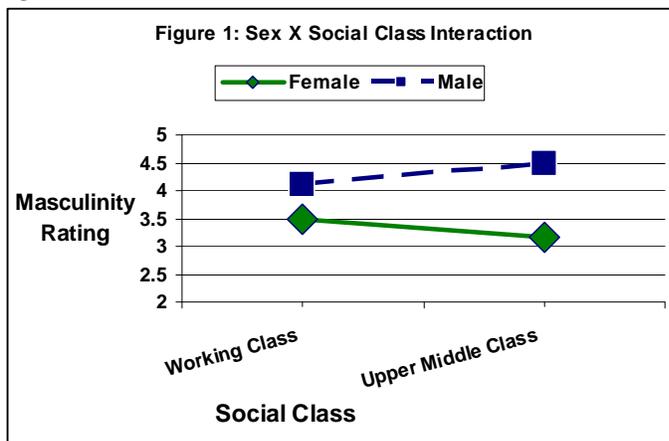
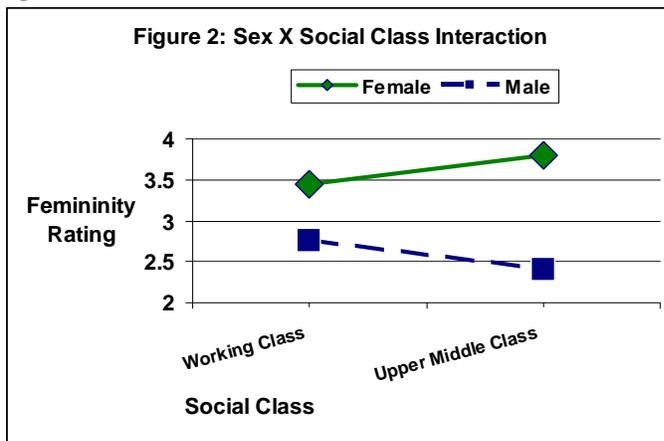


Figure 2



## DISCUSSION

When viewed together, the findings suggest that working class individuals are seen as more balanced in femininity and masculinity than are middle/upper class individuals who represent more extreme notions of femininity for women and masculinity for men. A surprising finding was that middle/upper class men were seen as more masculine and less feminine than working class men. Fewer than expected race results were found; although there was a trend toward Black men being seen as more masculine than White men. Social class and sex interacted such that stereotypes were strongest for middle/upper class men and women. More importantly, the results provide empirical support for the theoretical literature arguing that race, sex and class must be considered as interdependent (Rothenberg, 2003).

Various factors may have contributed to our hypotheses not being supported. The experiences of our participant sample of white women in Wisconsin could have resulted in being unable to key in to the stereotypes we were investigating or perhaps there have been changes in our society concerning perceptions of sex, race, and social class. Our scenario could have had greater exaggerations between sex, race, and social class. We do not know if our participants were attending to the key variables. Therefore, future research may wish to make changes to improve upon our research. These changes may include a more diverse sample (sex, race, age, major), clearer distinctions of variables in the scenarios, and a post-test to check attendance to variables. Although our findings did not fully represent our hypotheses, this study provided empirical findings related to issues related to sex, race, and social class and help inform future applications and research.

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