

## **Gender Identity: Exchangeable Roles and Parental Attachment**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *Gender roles are those aspects of the individual's attitudes and behaviors that society associates with each sex. The two dimensions of gender were considered over time two facets of the same concept. S. Bem (1974) questions this view suggesting that masculinity and femininity are two distinct dimensions which each individual possesses in different proportions, regardless of one's gender.*

**Objectives:** *The objectives of this study were: to identify the main attributes associated with the masculinity/femininity concepts and the description of the exchangeable nature of those attributes and to analyze the correlation between different parental attachment styles and sex-role identity.*

**Methods:** *The measurements were made with two inventories: an adaptation of Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) and one of Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ). The sample of this research included 82 participants with ages between 19 and 48 years old, with the mean age  $M=24$ .*

**Results:** *The results revealed that there were no significant correlations between the two scales (BSRI and PAQ). Significant correlations had been found between the BSRI scales, androgyny, femininity, masculinity and some indices of PAQ. Regarding the second objective, the femininity concept was partially explained by some masculine attributes and the masculinity concept was also explained partially by some feminine attributes.*

**Conclusion:** *The exchangeable nature of traditional masculine and feminine attributes, observed in the linear regressions presented in the results section, indicate that in the present time some of these attributes could be specific for both genders and may as well be considered neutral.*

**Keywords:** *sex-role, gender research, BSRI, PAQ*

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## **I. Introduction**

Regardless of one's culture, people were always preoccupied of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man. Generally speaking, being a man or a woman doesn't always refer to the biological structure of the individual. In fact there is a linguistic synonymy in some parts of the world between the terms: "man" and "masculinity" and "woman" and "femininity". Thus we may presume that an individual doesn't possess only a sex/gender, but also a sex-role. People living inside a community are socially preoccupied to fit one of these gender roles valued by their cultural space.

The concept of "gender role" or "gender identity" can be defined as a cumulus of social expectations on how the conduct of a person should be forged through the models of specific feminine and masculine behavior (C. Tudose, 2005). Gender has always, historically speaking, been considered a linear construct measured by the biological sex of an individual. But humans actively build their own "self" through the agency of their participation in the society they live in. And this "self" is a facilitator of their adaptation in the communities they belong to. The self can be considered a dynamic cultural creation. One's image, emotions and motivations are molded in the shadow of cultural values, ideals and commonly accepted social norms (S.E. Cross, L. Madson, 1997).

Gender identity leaves its mark on different aspects of common life, from workplace to sexual intimacy. In the book entitled "Elements of couple's psychology", the authors I. Mitrofan and N. Mitrofan state the following about human sexuality: "*But what is little known and understood about human sexuality is its dimension as an act of understanding the other and oneself and of discovering and acknowledgment of the self through the agency of the opposite sex, an act of identification and development of the feminine and masculine roles*" (I. Mitrofan, N. Mitrofan, 1996, p. 29).

It seems that sex is confirmed by the presence of others and certain feminine traits can be built in an antagonistic manner with the masculine ones. These transgenerational elements of families, the transmission of feminine and masculine behavioral patterns to the descendants, can influence their gender identity and their vision on the world in general, not only by the power of a good example but also by counterexample. Thus, gender identity has a general influence, represented by culture and a specific one, represented by the family.

In traditional society, there were generally distinguished two genders, two perceptions of genders

to be more precise, "masculine" and "feminine". Up until the late 70's, gender was considered a single bipolar dimension. But a series of researches had denied this vision by theorizing that femininity and masculinity are two separate dimensions that an individual can adhere to more or less. Starting with this observation many psychologists began to look at gender under a new perspective. Among them was Sandra Bem who made an instrument that is used even in the present time: "*Bem Sex-Role Inventory*", in short BSRI, which approaches the two dimensions of gender not as parts of the same ensemble, but as separate and orthogonal ones (Bem, 1974 apud C. J. Auster, S.C. Ohm, 2000).

The construction of the instrument, *Bem Sex-Role Inventory*, was based on the assumption that gender is not a one-dimensional construct, but a multidimensional one. Masculinity and femininity were perceived and conceptualized as two independent dimensions. The participants in the study were able to fit some of their personal traits in the two dimensions mentioned before. This inventory has a number of items that differentiates it from other scales used before; its emergence, for example from the scale "masculinity and femininity" from the *California Psychological Inventory*. One of the differentiating factors is the argument sustained by the author of the test stating that the human individual has internalized throughout his development the desirable standards of society regarding the feminine and masculine sex-roles traditionally accepted (Bem, 1974 apud C. J. Auster, S.C. Ohm, 2000).

After the administration of the questionnaire in 1974, the empirical results confirmed the idea that masculinity and femininity don't always correlate with the biological sex of the participants. As a result, the creator of the test classified the participants in four groups: the androgynous group, participants with high levels of femininity and masculinity; masculine, the ones with a high level of masculinity and a low level of femininity; the feminine group with a high level of femininity and a low level of masculinity; and the undifferentiated group, participants that had a low score on both femininity and masculinity (J. Watson, R. Newby, 2005).

### **Gender roles socialization in childhood**

Through education, the child incorporates in his future personality and conducts certain aspects gained by learning and imitation. It is a fact that the first education is offered by parents, or a parental figure, and it can be stated that they are the ones that establish the fundamentals of the future conduct of a

child. This aspect was analyzed using the stories that parents tell their children as an instrument of measuring the behaviors valued by the parent of the same gender and the parent of the opposite gender. The participants that took part in this study were represented by 100 families together with their 4 year old children. The parents were asked to tell their child stories that were told to them when they were an infant. All of the adults then completed a questionnaire regarding their child's behavior; a subset of participants was assessed with the help of the BSRI. The stories were grouped using the themes: affiliation, realization and autonomy.

The results of the study indicated that when it comes to the theme "affiliation" that appeared in stories, there were no differences between parents. But, the fathers told their infants stories with a more powerful theme of autonomy than mothers, and the male infants were more likely to hear these stories as compared to the female ones. The researchers B. H. Fisse and Gemma Skillman discovered that there is a correlation between the gender identity of the parent and the gender of the child when it comes to choosing a story with a strong theme of realization. Parents that possessed a traditional gender identity recounted their sons' stories in which the main theme was realization, as opposed to the ones that had a non-traditional gender identity. The last group mentioned, told their daughters these stories (B.H. Fisse, G. Skillman, 2000).

The eagerness of parents to socialize their children in a socially accepted model pushes them to be actively involved in setting the directions regarding the development of their children's gender roles. Stories, tales as a socializing instrument have a cognitive and emotional impact on children. In these stories one can encounter powerful symbols of good and evil and a vast number of archetypes. These symbols guide the infant's manner of thinking and imagination to the incorporation, at least at a cognitive level, of various values and attitudes. Regarding the sex-role conduct, it is structured by the approval and disapproval of the parent involved in a relationship with the child.

#### **Gender role identity and self esteem**

The implications of the sex-role of an individual are vast and reach many levels, like social interaction and personal development. J. W. Burnett et al. had put together the concepts of sex-roles and self-esteem in their study called: "*Gender identity and self-esteem: A Consideration of Environmental Factors*". The objective of the researchers was to examine the interaction between masculinity and femininity and the social pressures, or environmental ones on individuals

to show these traits. Specifically, they wanted to discover whether participants feel a stronger pressure to demonstrate masculine traits as opposed to the feminine ones. The hypothesis of the study was that individual masculinity will have a higher correlation index with self-esteem than individual femininity (J.W. Burnett et al., 1995). The study was conducted with the help of 236 participants with the age between 17-22 years. They filled in a questionnaire for assessing their own gender identity, "*Personal Attributes Questionnaire*" and for their self-esteem: "*Coppersmith Self-esteem Inventory*".

The results showed that individuals who possess masculine behavioral characteristics like: determination (decision making aspect), independence, and a high level of competitiveness, have a significantly higher level of self-esteem compared to the participants that had these characteristics at a minimal level or who didn't possess them at all. When it comes to femininity, regardless of the participants' sex, it didn't positively correlate with self-esteem. Thus it may be presumed that the social pressure for masculine traits is stronger than for feminine traits (J.W. Burnett et al., 1995). An important factor for the interpretation of the results of this study is the culture of the participants. If it is a patriarchy type culture, the pressure mentioned, may be a cause of it.

The mechanisms used to assume roles in diverse social contexts may have an indirect effect on an individual's self-esteem. Self-esteem is one of the most researched concepts in social psychology. This concept refers generally to a global positive evaluation of oneself (Gecas 1982, Rosenberg 1990, Rosenberg et al., 1995 apud A.D. Cast, P. J. Burke, 2002). Self-esteem has two distinct dimensions: competence and value. The dimension called "competence" refers to the degree in which people perceive themselves as capable and efficient individuals, and the dimension "value" can be understood as the level of value that an individual assesses to himself (Gecas, 1982 apud A.D. Cast, P.J. Burke, 2002).

Self-esteem can be negatively influenced by the expectations and the restraints of roles by society. Role expectation targets social life in general and men and women may feel that they need to fulfill these social expectations. Some researchers propose that gender inequalities are the ones that produce the differences that we perceive and those inequalities may produce the cultural impulse to search for them, even if in reality these are insignificant or nonexistent. In the self-image of each person an important aspect is the perception of their own masculinity and femininity.

The general theory says that as one person defines himself/herself in terms of masculinity/femininity, and this definition is accurate with the reality, his/her level of self-value or self-esteem is higher. Some studies even indicate that, regarding the concept of androgyny, if a person has a cumulus of masculine and feminine traits his/her self-esteem tends to be higher. This happens in societies with a non-traditional view. In a traditional society, androgyny may be a handicap as the result of excessive value attributed to traditional gender-roles. Still, in the US, a significant number of studies have indicated that androgyny is not a good predictor for self-esteem. Instead, an important factor for self-esteem seemed to be masculinity (Mead, 1934 apud Baumeister, J. M. Twenge, 2003).

### **Differential education and the development of gender role identity**

The socialization between male and female infants and their parents is different, based on the child's gender. For a better adaptation of their child to the society he/she lives in, parents promote a set of behaviors that fit the gender-role socially accepted in that period of time. This encouragement is seen in the reactions of reinforcement of some actions and the rejection of others. Psychologists from the University of Harvard, Ed Tronick and Katherine Weinberg have demonstrated that starting with the age of 6, children can have different reactions to frustration. Parents tend to respond more actively to male child behavior, reinforcing the infant to be more aggressive and in a calmer way to female children in order to reduce the behavior that was not under the control of the caregiver (E. Tronick et al. 1999).

## **II. Methods**

### **Objectives**

The main objective of the present study is to describe the interaction between different aspects of personal parental attachment and the various attributes that define one's gender identity. Parental attachment is conceptualized in this research as the emotional and interactive closeness that young adults have with their parents in the present and also their perception of the past regarding this bond. Parental attachment, a concept that implies: *affective quality of the relationship, parents as the source of support, parents as facilitators of independence*, is presumed to be correlated in this study with specific gender-roles of participants. Gender identity is conceptualized as a dimension of personality characterized by the presence or the absence of traits that are socially perceived as a definition of a sex. Another objective of the study was

to analyze the perception of participants regarding different attributes that link to the dimensions of masculinity and femininity in BSRI.

### **Hypotheses**

1. As the score of the affective quality of the relationship with the mother is higher the score of masculinity will decrease.

2. The masculinity score varies inversely proportional with the degree of independence from the mother (Indicator M47 from the questionnaire - *I work it out on my own, without help from anyone*).

3. The concept of femininity can be associated with feminine indicators from the BSRI but also with some masculine ones.

4. The concept of masculinity can be associated with the masculine indicators from the BSRI but also with some feminine ones.

### **Instruments**

#### **Parental Attachment Questionnaire**

In this research I have used a Romanian adaptation of the PAQ, developed by the psychologist Maureen E. Kenny, professor at the University of Boston. The questionnaire has 55 statements. The participants can assess in a different manner each parent (mother/father) on the degree of truthfulness that the statement has for them on a Likert type scale, from 1 to 5 where: 1= not at all; 2=somewhat; 3=a moderate amount; 4=quite a bit and 5=very much. The instrument has three scales: *affective quality of the relationship, parents as source of support* and *parents as facilitators of independence*. This instrument is a self-report questionnaire and it targets adolescents and young adults.

#### **Bem Sex-role Inventory**

This instrument represents an adaptation of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory developed by Sandra L. Bem. The adaptation was realized transforming the adjectives that the author used in simple sentences to preserve and to obtain a better construct validity of the inventory. It has 60 statements that represent a series of attributes where participants assess if it fits them or not on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=Never true; 7=Always true). The categories in which the participants are placed are: masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated.

#### **Participants**

The sample of this research has 82 participants with the age between 19 and 48 years old with the mean age  $M=24.1$ . The sex of the participants was mostly female  $N=60$  and males were present in a number of  $N=22$  participants. The educational profile varied from high-school graduates to PhD students.

**Research design**

The data was collected via internet. The participants received the instruments, in Microsoft Excel format and they completed it using the information that was provided in the excel worksheets (instruments, instruction to complete them and a practical example). At the end, the participants could view their own results in a different worksheet.

*affective quality of the relationship with the mother is higher the score of masculinity will decrease*” was not confirmed as a result of the lack of correlation between the variables. The Pearson index indicated an insignificant correlation between the score of the masculinity and the score of the affective quality of relationship with the mother:  $r = -0.013$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . The possible causes of this lack of correlation can be: the homogenous sample, the small number of male participants and the relevance of the indicators for masculinity and femininity in the present time (Table 1).

**III. Results**

The first hypothesis “As the score of the

Table 1: Correlations between BSRI scales and PAQ

		Masculinity score	Femininity score	Neutral Attributes	Masculinity score-femininity score
<b>Score affective quality of the relationship-MOTHER</b>	Pearson Correlation	-0.013	0.037	-0.109	0.039
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.906	0.74	0.331	0.729
	N	82	82	82	82
<b>Score parents as facilitators of independence MOTHER</b>	Pearson Correlation	-0.013	0.128	-0.009	0.108
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.908	0.252	0.938	0.332
	N	82	82	82	82
<b>Score parents as facilitators of independence FATHER</b>	Pearson Correlation	-0.119	-0.016	-0.136	0.08
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.285	0.886	0.225	0.475
	N	82	82	82	82
<b>Score affective quality of the relationship FATHER</b>	Pearson Correlation	0.015	0.004	-0.166	-0.008
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.894	0.972	0.136	0.94
	N	82	82	82	82
<b>Score parents as source of support MOTHER</b>	Pearson Correlation	-0.1	0.215	-0.05	<b>.243(*)</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.37	0.052	0.658	0.028
	N	82	82	82	82
<b>Score parents as source of support FATHER</b>	Pearson Correlation	-0.013	0.178	-0.019	0.146
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.91	0.11	0.863	0.189
	N	82	82	82	82

The second hypothesis “the masculinity score varies inversely proportional with the degree of independence from the mother” was confirmed. The correlation index for the item 47 “I work it out on my own, without help from anyone” and the masculinity score was  $r = 0.361$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . I also found that there is a correlation between this item and the androgyny score  $r = -0.353$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . The first correlation can be described by the tendency of the masculine attributes

of being associated with individualism, a dominant attitude and a somewhat aggressive behavior towards others but also a denial of the dependence of others, in this case the mother figure. To seek help from one’s mother may appear as a rejection of one’s masculinity. The second score can be explained by the relationship of the individual with both femininity and masculinity high score of accepting and seeking help from the mother.

Table 2: Correlations between item 47 PAQ and BSRI scales

		Masculinity score	Femininity score	Neutral attributes score	Masculinity score-femininity score
<b>M47 I work it out on my own, without help from anyone</b>	Pearson Correlation	<b>.361(**)</b>	-0.096	0.176	<b>-.353(**)</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.391	0.114	0.001
	N	82	82	82	82

**Feminine and masculine attributes and their exchangeable nature**

The third and fourth hypotheses “*the concept of femininity can be associated with feminine indicators from the BSRI but also with some masculine ones.*” and “*the concept of masculinity can be associated with the masculine indicators from the BSRI but also with some feminine one.*” were both confirmed.

In order to observe in detail how much the attributes of femininity that S. Bem proposed can be associated with the concept of femininity I used a linear regression where the dependent variable was the score obtained at the femininity scale and the independent variables were the attributes associated

with femininity in the questionnaire (please note that the instrument was adapted in Romanian by transforming the adjectives used by S. Bem in simple sentences to better preserve the consistency and validity of construct of the instrument).

As Table 3 shows, femininity is associated firstly with the attributes: “*I am a feminine person*”; “*I don’t use harsh language*”; “*I am a yielding person*”; “*I am timid person*” and lastly, and less, with “*I am a loyal person*”; “*I am eager to soothe others’ pain*”. This hierarchy shows that the feminine profile of the participants indicates an introvert type profile: timidity, yielding and a temperate language.

Table 3: Linear Regression feminine attributes \*femininity score

Order		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
		0.113	0.096		0.243
1	BSRI_20 I am a feminine person	0.047	0.006	0.139	.000
2	BSRI_53 I don’t use harsh language	0.054	0.005	0.137	.000
3	BSRI_2 I am a yielding person	0.059	0.006	0.132	.000
4	BSRI_8 I am a timid person	0.048	0.005	0.124	.000
5	BSRI_59 I am an affectionate person	0.059	0.01	0.117	.000
6	BSRI_44 I am a tender person	0.05	0.009	0.106	.000
7	BSRI_50 I am a childish person	0.047	0.006	0.104	.000
8	BSRI_32 I am a person full of compassion	0.053	0.01	0.103	.000
9	BSRI_38 I am a soft spoken person	0.048	0.008	0.101	.000
10	BSRI_56 I love children	0.048	0.007	0.099	.000
11	BSRI_47 I am a gullible person	0.048	0.006	0.098	.000
12	BSRI_14 I am a flatterable person	0.047	0.007	0.095	.000
13	BSRI_23 I am a sympathetic person	0.052	0.01	0.094	.000
14	BSRI_41 I am a warm person	0.052	0.012	0.085	.000
15	BSRI_5 I am a cheerful person	0.043	0.008	0.073	.000
16	BSRI_26 I am sensible to others needs	0.048	0.011	0.071	.000
17	BSRI_29 I am an understanding person	0.062	0.015	0.069	.000

18	BSRI_17 I am a loyal person	0.045	0.011	0.056	.000
19	BSRI_11 I am an affectionate person	0.031	0.011	0.055	0.006
20	BSRI_35 I am eager to soothe others pain	0.027	0.01	0.049	0.009

Dependent Variable: Femininity score

When the dependent variable femininity was explained through the masculine attributes, the results indicated that the masculine attributes that were strongly associated with femininity were: “I have leadership abilities”; “I make decisions easily”; “I have a strong personality”. The masculine attributes that had a poor correlation with femininity were: “I

behave like a leader”; “I am a dominant person”; “I am a masculine person”. The masculine attributes associated in a manner with femininity indicate that there is quite a change in the traditional view on femininity, change defined as self-perceived power and independence.

Table 4: Linear Regression masculine attributes \*femininity score

Order		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	Sig.
		2.939	0.664		.000
1	BSRI_25 I have leadership abilities	0.184	0.084	0.382	0.034
2	BSRI_31 I make decisions easily	0.135	0.051	0.3	0.01
3	BSRI_34 I am a self sufficient person	0.097	0.047	0.201	0.044
4	BSRI_13 I am an assertive person	0.074	0.046	0.167	0.108
5	BSRI_16 I have a strong personality	0.062	0.082	0.104	0.457
6	BSRI_52 I am an individualistic person	0.037	0.048	0.082	0.451
7	BSRI_10 I am an athletic person	0.024	0.043	0.057	0.572
8	BSRI_1 I am self-reliant	0.034	0.092	0.046	0.713
9	BSRI_19 I am a forceful person	0.023	0.074	0.037	0.759
10	BSRI_4 I defend my own beliefs	0.03	0.101	0.035	0.771
11	BSRI_58 I am an ambitious person	0.019	0.072	0.032	0.792
12	BSRI_22 I am an analytical person	0.014	0.057	0.027	0.803
13	BSRI_43 I am willing to take a stand	0.012	0.065	0.022	0.854
14	BSRI_55 I am a competitive person	0.007	0.057	0.013	0.905
15	BSRI_7 I am a competitive person	-0.02	0.068	-0.035	0.776
16	BSRI_28 I am willing to take risks	-0.025	0.071	-0.047	0.725
17	BSRI_46 I am an aggressive person	-0.046	0.054	-0.103	0.393
18	BSRI_49 I behave like a leader	-0.094	0.077	-0.218	0.228
19	BSRI_37 I am a dominant person	-0.109	0.061	-0.279	0.079
20	BSRI_40 I am a masculine person	-0.141	0.039	-0.408	0.001

Dependent Variable: Femininity score

When the dependent variable was the masculinity score, as postulated in the fourth hypothesis, and the independent variables were attributes associated with masculinity, the most powerful association was with the items: “I am a masculine person”; “I am a dominant person”; “I am

an athletic person”; “I behave like a leader”. The attributes that poorly explained masculinity were “I am a forceful person”; “I am self-reliant”; “I defend my own beliefs”. In this sample it seems that masculinity was associated with the type of an active, dominant and strong individual in his social interactions.

Table 5: Linear regression masculine attributes \*masculinity scores

Order		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
		0	.000		1.000
1	BSRI_40 I am a masculine person	0.05	.000	0.144	.000
2	BSRI_37 I am a dominant person	0.05	.000	0.128	.000
3	BSRI_10 I am an athletic person	0.05	.000	0.117	.000
4	BSRI_49 I behave like a leader	0.05	.000	0.115	.000
5	BSRI_13 I am an assertive person	0.05	.000	0.112	.000
6	BSRI_46 I am an aggressive person	0.05	.000	0.111	.000
7	BSRI_52 I am an individualistic person	0.05	.000	0.111	.000
8	BSRI_31 I make decisions easily	0.05	.000	0.11	.000
9	BSRI_34 I am a self-sufficient person	0.05	.000	0.104	.000
10	BSRI_25 I have leadership abilities	0.05	.000	0.103	.000
11	BSRI_22 I am an analytical person	0.05	.000	0.095	.000
12	BSRI_28 I am willing to take risks	0.05	.000	0.093	.000
13	BSRI_55 I am a competitive person	0.05	.000	0.091	.000
14	BSRI_7 I am a competitive person	0.05	.000	0.09	.000
15	BSRI_43 I am willing to take a stand	0.05	.000	0.09	.000
16	BSRI_16 I have a strong personality	0.05	.000	0.084	.000
17	BSRI_58 I am an ambitious person	0.05	.000	0.084	.000
18	BSRI_19 I am a forceful person	0.05	.000	0.081	.000
19	BSRI_1 I am self-reliant	0.05	.000	0.067	.000
20	BSRI_4 I defend my own beliefs	0.05	.000	0.059	.000

Dependent Variable: Masculinity score

When the dependent variable, masculinity score was explained by the independent variables feminine attributes, the results indicated that the most strong correlation was between the masculinity score and: “I am an affectionate person”; “I am sensible to others needs”; “I am a sympathetic person”; “I am a cheerful person”. The feminine attributes that were less correlated with masculinity were: “I am an affectionate person”; “I am a soft spoken person”; “I am a timid person”; “I am a feminine person”. The feminine attributes that explain masculinity in this sample reveal that masculinity has also a compassionate, tender and helpful side.

#### IV. Conclusions

The exchangeable nature of traditional masculine and feminine attributes, demonstrated in the linear regressions presented in the results section, may

indicate that in the present time some of these attributes could be specific to both genders and may as well be considered neutral.

The results of this study are in conformity with the results of the study “Masculinity and femininity in Contemporary American Society: A reevaluation Using the Bem Sex-Role Inventory”, (C.J. Auster and S.C. Ohm, 2000) where 18 of the 20 feminine attributes were associated with the concept of femininity and 8 of the masculine attributes with the concept of masculinity (C.J. Auster. S.C. Ohm, 2000).

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