Gender Role Identity in a Sample of Italian Male Homosexuals

Rocco Zoccali, MD
Maria Rosaria Muscatello, MD, PhD
Antonio Bruno, MD, PhD
Domenico Serranò, MD
Domenica Campolo, MD
Gianluca Pandolfo, MD, PhD
Clemente Cedro, MD, PhD
Diletta La Torre, MD
Mario Meduri, MD

Division of Psychiatry, Department of Neuroscience, University of Messina, Italy

ABSTRACT. Gender role is a multifactorial concept, as gender-related attitudes, behaviors, and personality are partially autonomous. The aim of the study was to evaluate the prevalent gender role identity in a sample of male homosexuals. One hundred male homosexuals and 50 male heterosexuals matched for age and sex, have been assessed with the Italian version of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974). Statistically significant differences have been found between the two groups at the dimensions “Masculine” (z = 1.963; p = 0.001) and “Androgyny” (z = 2.367; p < 0.0001). The results obtained from the present study tend to confirm that homosexuals view themselves as androgynous individuals, sharing both features of masculine and feminine gender roles.

Address correspondence to: Rocco Zoccali, Dipartimento di Neuroscienze, Scienze Psichiatriche ed Anestesiologiche, Policlinico Universitario Via Consolare Valeria–Messina 98125, Italy. (E-mail: Rocco.Zoccali@unime.it).
KEYWORDS. Homosexuality, gender role, bsri, androgyny

INTRODUCTION

Since the removal of homosexuality from the revised third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III-R; APA, 1980), focus has shifted toward the adaptive processes of homosexuals to social and public realities. Sexual identity and its expression is a complex topic, and a distinction must be made between “gender identity,” or the ability to discriminate between males and females and to accurately identify one’s own sex (Kohlberg, 1966), and “gender role,” intended as

Rocco Zoccali is Professor of Psychiatry at the Department of Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the University of Messina, Italy. He is Director of the school of specialization in Clinical Psychology at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Messina. He is president of the Italian League of Mental Health, a national scientific society. He has produced more than 130 scientific publications in national and international journals. His main research areas are clinical psychiatry (personality disorders, mood, anxiety, and schizophrenia) biological psychiatry, and psychology.

Maria Rosaria Muscatello is a researcher at the Department of Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the University of Messina, Italy.

Antonio Bruno is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the University of Messina, Italy.

Domenico Serranò is Assistant of Psychiatry at the “Vojta” Rehabilitation Center, Rome, Italy.

Domenica Campolo is Assistant of Psychiatry at the Psychiatry Unit, Department of Neurosciences, University of Messina, Italy.

Gianluca Pandolfo is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the University of Messina, Italy.

Clemente Cedro is a researcher at the Department of Psychology, University of Messina, Italy.

Diletta La Torre is Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the Department of Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, University of Messina, Italy.

Mario Meduri is Professor of Psychiatry at the Department of Neurosciences, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery at the University of Messina, Italy. He is Director of the Institute of Psychiatry, and of the school of specialization in Psychiatry, University of Messina.

He has published more than 170 scientific articles in Italian and international journals. His main research fields are: neuropsychology of frontal brain dysfunction; early diagnosis of schizophrenia; neurobiology of emotions.
the set of behaviors, attitudes, and personality features that are more
typical of a male or female within a given society (Zucker, 1985). If the
anatomical sex is biologically determined, gender role is socially and
culturally constructed.

Gender-role development has been defined as “the process whereby
children come to acquire the behaviors, attitudes, interests, emotional
reactions, and motives that are culturally defined as appropriate for
members of their sex” (Bussey & Perry, 1982, p. 262). Theories of gender-
role development focus on the importance of environmental influences, as
emphasized by Holt and Ellis (1998), who highlighted the role of the
rights and responsibilities that a society associates with each sex; therefore,
race, age, and social class influence individual’s gender roles, affecting the
behaviors and attitudes expected of each sex (Lindsey, 1994). According
to Bem (1977), masculine and feminine gender roles can be conceptual-
ized as two separate dimensions and not as opposite poles on the same
continuum; this is supported by Spence (1984) who stated that masculinity
and femininity are two independent unidimensional entities.

Personality features of masculinity and femininity have been measured
adopting trait approaches (Bem, 1974; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp,
1974). Moreover, gender typing may result from gender-schematic pro-
cessing, that is, when individuals tend to process information, including
information about themselves, according to the cultural definitions of mas-
culinity and femininity. Thus, individuals who are highly gender schematic
strongly adhere to gender role norms and organize their world views
according to gender role beliefs (Whitley, 2001). Conversely, Spence and
Sawin (1985) suggested that gender identity is a multifactorial concept, as
gender-related attitudes, behaviors, and personality are partially autono-
mous. Indeed, a person can be described as “masculine,” as “feminine,” as
“androgy nous,” if he or she manifests characteristic of both and, finally, as
“undifferentiated,” if he or she has neither clear masculine nor feminine
features. Therefore, masculinity and femininity are thought as two inde-
pendent clusters of socially desirable instrumental and expressive traits
(Bem, 1974); androgynous subjects, who are not inclined to adhere to
these standards, might have an advantage over a gender-typed counterpart.
Moreover, Bem (1977) demonstrated that androgynous individuals were
more comfortable and competent in performing a variety of tasks and
provided some evidence that androgyny was linked to self-esteem.

Literature on homosexual males highlighted early identity formation
and sexual feelings even if the research in this field remains poor in large-
scale random population surveys, with the exception of two large
sociostatistic analyses conducted in Italy among homosexual, lesbian, and transsexual subjects by interviews registered on videotapes and brief questionnaires (Barbagli & Colombo, 2001; Casiccia, Saraceno, & Torrioni, 2003). The studies collected a large amount of data of sociological interest, and the results evidenced a changing situation in Italy, regarding sexual behaviors that appeared to be more flexible and interchangeable, without prefixed or stable roles, the process of “coming out,” and the diffusion of meeting points for gay and lesbian people. These data were of great interest within a sociological context; nevertheless, they were exclusively collected by interviews and no standardized psychometric instruments were employed.

The present study was designed to identify the prevalent gender role and gender-related self-concepts in a sample of male homosexuals who self-acknowledged their homosexual identity to themselves and to society (“coming out”), moving from the hypothesis that homosexual subjects may be differently gender-typed than heterosexuals.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study sample consisted of 100 male homosexuals (mean age = 34.2 years, SD = 8.9) randomly recruited during the Gay Pride Meeting in Rome, June 17–20, 2004. The control sample was constituted by 50 male heterosexuals matched for age and sex, recruited from the general population (mean age = 35.3 years, SD = 4.7). All participants underwent a brief psychiatric interview in order to exclude in order to exclude any psychiatric disorder. All subjects gave informed consent to participate in the study and accepted to be assessed with the Italian version of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974). The BSRI is a 60-item self-rating scale in order to measure masculinity and femininity as two independent dimensions rather than bipolar points on one continuum. It includes 40 adjectives describing 20 stereotypically masculine traits, 20 stereotypically feminine traits, and 20 neutral traits. Participants rated the extent that they perceived themselves to possess for each of these traits on a 7-point scale with endpoints “never or almost never true” (1) to “always or almost always true” (7). The items were scored on independent dimensions of masculinity and femininity as well as androgyny and undifferentiated classifications:

- high on masculinity and femininity—androgynous
- low on masculinity and femininity—undifferentiated
high on masculinity and low on femininity—“masculine”
high on femininity and low on masculinity—“feminine”

The BSRI is a valid and reliable instrument for assessing gender roles; it has shown high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (Bem, 1974; Holt & Ellis, 1998).

**RESULTS**

The data have been submitted to verification and control of quality and, subsequently, to descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The differences between the two groups have been verified using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for two independent samples. Table 1 shows the comparison of the frequencies at BSRI dimensions between homosexual (n = 100) and controls (n = 50). Using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, two independent samples statistically significant differences were found between the two groups at the dimensions “masculine” (z = 1.963; p = 0.001) and “androgyny” (z = 2.367; p < 0.0001).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The results obtained showed that the homosexual sample examined in the present study was prevalently androgynous, as they scored high in both masculinity and femininity.

As stated by Heilbrun (1973, p. 16), the concept of androgyny refers to “... a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender role</th>
<th>Homosexuals (n = 100)</th>
<th>Heterosexuals (n = 50)</th>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Androgynous</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undifferentiated</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned.” Following the traditional point of view about gender roles, features including assertiveness, competition, decision making, confidence, ambition, and instrumental orientation were associated with the masculine role; conversely nurturing, gentleness, affection, helpfulness, empathy, and expressive orientation were more traditionally related to femininity (Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, & Lueptow, 2001). The psychologically androgynous person, that is, the individual who possesses comparable levels of both masculine and feminine qualities, was perceived as relatively advantaged in comparison with sex-typed individuals in terms of behavioural flexibility and psychological well being (Bem, 1979). Similar results were obtained by Flaherty and Dusek (1980), who observed that androgynous individuals, whether male or female, reported the highest self-esteem; on the same line of research, data obtained with the Personal Attributes Questionnaire showed that androgynous were preferred as partners and they were perceived as better adjusted (Green & Kenrick, 1994). Androgynous individuals are believed to be more effective as they can perform both the instrumental, directive, or traditionally masculine roles and the expressive, nurturing, or traditionally feminine roles (Konrad & Harris, 2002). Recently, the construct of androgyny has also been related to emotional intelligence (Guastello & Guastello, 2003).

On the other hand, theoretical controversies have arisen on the relationship among androgyny, psychological well being, and self-concepts. Studies based on the cultural gender belief system, which includes the set of stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, and attitudes toward appropriate roles for the sexes, have highlighted that individuals who possess characteristics associated with the other gender are not viewed positively (Whitley, 1999).

Androgyny is traditionally thought to be a balanced identity that combines the qualities of both genders. It can be argued that gender stereotypes do not include only desirable aspects of femininity and masculinity (Ricciardelli & Williams, 1995); consequently, an androgynous gender role may also consist of a balance of negative feminine and negative masculine traits, that is, an identity that combines the failings/defects of both genders and, thus, creates the possibility of an undesirable or negatively androgynous gender role (Woodhill & Samuels, 2003). Research on homosexual samples have suggested that gay men and lesbians differ from same-sex heterosexuals on measures assessing the male-typicality versus the female-typicality of interests, occupational preferences, and hobbies (Lippa, 2002). Moreover, they strongly differ from the heterosexual
counterpart on self-ascribed masculinity and femininity as result from self-reports on gender role (Lippa, 2000).

The results obtained from the present study tend to confirm that homosexuals viewed themselves as androgynous individuals, sharing both features of masculine and feminine gender roles. It may be hypothesized that the homosexual condition leads to a certain retrenchment of the masculine role with the concurrent assumption of feminine features. It is important to note, however, that our sample exclusively included subjects recruited during the public meeting of Gay Pride in Rome; all participants were open and ego-syntonic homosexuals who fully developed their identity through a “coming out” process. The coming out is thought by many authors as a succession of distinct stages that occur in a certain order, including the self-labeling as homosexual, followed by disclosure of sexual identity to others (Schindhelm & Hospers, 2004). The process also involves the transformation of a socially stigmatized identity into an accepted identity through the exploration and socialization in the gay community. On the basis of this assumption, it seems clear that the examined subjects are characterized by a positive affirmation of homosexuality, which involves the overcoming of stereotyped social rules.

This study has several limitations. Common to all studies of homosexual people is the problem of ascertainment, in that most samples are unlikely to be truly representative of the homosexual community, consequently, our results may be not representative for all male homosexuals; moreover, the sample was small and no measures of quality of life and self-esteem were included. However, the ways and degree to which homosexuals are sex-role-atypical need further study that also extends to females; this would provide a better understanding of the implications that gender roles have in homosexual subjects.

REFERENCES


