

Title: Male Student Veterans: Hardiness, Psychological Well-Being, and Masculine Norms

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**Abstract**

This study assessed whether conformity to masculine norms was associated with psychological well-being among 117 college-attending veterans and active-duty service members, and the extent to which hardiness mediated that relationship. Results indicated that greater conformity to masculine norms was associated with lower psychological well-being ( $r = -.31, p < .001$ ), with hardiness fully mediating that relation.

### Male Student Veterans: Hardiness, Psychological Well-Being and Masculine Norms

Currently over 450,000 U.S. military veterans use military benefits to attend U.S. colleges and universities (Sewall, 2010). While there is a dearth of empirical literature regarding the reintegration of veterans into higher education (Chancellor's Task Force for a Veteran-Friendly Campus, 2007), research suggests that many experience difficulties during and after this transition (Black, Westwood, & Sorsdal, 2007). For example, veterans experience difficulty securing jobs, housing, and health benefits previously provided by the military (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010); coping with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries (Bowling & Sherman, 2008); and dealing with alienation from faculty and students due to their military service (Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011). These obstacles are often compounded by colleges' lack of preparedness to deal with their unique emotional, social, financial, and academic needs (Chancellor's Task Force for a Veteran-Friendly Campus, 2007). Thus, it is important for researchers to investigate factors which influence student veteran well-being. Additionally, because men comprise about 86% of the U.S. military, the potential influence of student male veterans' masculine norms warrants empirical attention (DoD, 2011).

### **Masculinity in the U.S. Military**

Military training encourages recruits to conform to a variety of traditional North American masculine norms. For example, personal self-reliance and emotional stoicism are thought to promote personal survival and mission completion, and are thus highly valued (Eisenhart, 1998; Green, Emslie, O'Neill, Hunt, & Walker, 2010). Likewise, dominance is a central theme: superiors dominate the trainees; successful soldiers dominate the enemy (or lose their lives); and trainees must dominate their fears and weaknesses to earn the right to become soldiers (Ehrenreich, 1997; Rueb, Erskine, & Foti, 2008; Woodward, 2003). Furthermore,

competent servicemen are seen as embodying the rugged warrior ideal, which emphasizes violence, toughness, overt heterosexual desire, and risk-taking (Barret, 1996; Brooks, 2001; Higate, 2007). Unsurprisingly, male military personnel tend to report high levels of conformity to these norms (Jakupcak et al., 2006; Kurpius & Lucart, 2000). Among other reasons, the military intentionally promotes these norms because it is believed that such conformity promotes recruits' hardiness (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978).

### **Hardiness and Psychological Well-Being**

Hardiness encompasses attitudes that provide the courage and motivation to turn difficult situations into growth opportunities, and the ability to remain healthy despite high levels of stress (Kobasa, 1979; Maddi, 2004, 2006). Hardiness is theorized to have three components: (a) Control (vs. powerlessness) is the belief that people can influence their life situation, with people who are higher in this construct having a stronger internal locus of control; (b) Commitment (vs. alienation) is the ability to remain involved in life's activities, with individuals who are higher in this construct having greater self-worth and purpose in life; and (c) Challenge (vs. threat) is the anticipation of change as an opportunity for growth, with individuals who are higher in this construct having lower need for security and less fear of making mistakes, which fosters personal growth (Bissonette, 1998; Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa, Maddi, & Kahn, 1982; Mathis & Lecci, 1999).

Relevant to this study, among Army personnel, greater hardiness was associated with better mental health and lower levels of anxiety and depression one and five months after returning from overseas deployment (Adler & Dolan, 2006; Bartone, 1999). Hardiness also predicted the success of Special Forces candidates during a difficult selection course (Bartone, Roland, Picano, & Williams, 2008). Additionally, hardiness was found to inversely correlate

with PTSD among veterans (King, King, Fairbank, Keane, & Adams, 1998; Zakin, Solomon, & Neria, 2003).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the present study was to assess: (a) whether conformity to masculine norms is associated with greater or lesser psychological well-being among male student veterans and (b) if hardiness mediates that relation. On one hand, past research on servicemen suggests that conformity to traditional North American masculine norms is associated with a host of negative outcomes, such as lower life satisfaction, poorer adaptation, more severe PTSD symptoms, and prolonged symptom duration (see Burns & Mahalik, 2011; Morrison, 2011). On the other hand, the military purposely promotes conformity to masculine norms as it is believed to enhance hardiness and therefore psychological well-being. In line with this reasoning, a few investigations have reported associations between conformity and positive outcomes, such as greater courage, endurance, and psychological well-being (e.g., Hammer & Good, 2010; Rosen, Weber, Martin, 2000; Tager & Good, 2005). However, these findings are based on civilian samples. As variations have been noted in these relations among different groups, this study sought to investigate these relations among male student veterans, an important group for whom no data currently exists.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants included 117 male student veterans who ranged in age from 19 to 52 ( $M = 28.6$ ;  $SD = 6.07$ ). The majority of the sample was white ( $n = 98$ ; 83.8%), followed by biracial/multiracial ( $n = 10$ ; 8.5%), Black ( $n = 2$ ; 1.7%), Asian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 2$ ; 1.7%), Native American ( $n = 2$ ; 1.7%), and Hispanic ( $n = 2$ ; 1.7%). In terms of relationship status, 54

participants (46.2%) identified themselves as single, 50 identified themselves as married (42.7%), 11 identified themselves as divorced (9.4%), and 2 identified themselves as separated (1.7%).

Forty-six participants identified the Army as their primary branch of service (39.3%), 27 identified as Marine Corps veterans (23.1%), 26 identified as Navy veterans (22.2%), 17 identified as Air Force veterans (14.5%), and one did not identify a branch of service (.9%). Mean number of years in service was 6.7 years, with a range from 1 to 24 years. In terms of pay grades while in the service, the majority of respondents were junior non-commissioned officers (E5-E6;  $n = 58$ , 49.6%) followed by enlisted soldiers (E1-E4;  $n = 47$ , 40.2%), junior officers (O1-O3;  $n = 7$ , 6.0%), senior officers (O4-O6;  $n = 3$ , 2.6%), warrant officers (W1-W2;  $n = 1$ ; .9%), and senior non-commissioned officers (E7-E9;  $n = 1$ ; .9%).

About one-third ( $n = 39$ ; 33.4%) of respondents identified their primary occupation as directly combat related (combat arms:  $n = 34$ ; 29.1%; special operations forces:  $n = 5$ ; 4.3%), followed by engineering/technical ( $n = 19$ ; 16.2%); electronics/electrical repair ( $n = 12$ ; 10.3%), and health care ( $n = 7$ ; 6.0%). Most participants reported at least one deployment during their military service ( $n = 92$ , 80.3%). Fifty participants served in Operation Iraqi Freedom only (42.7%); other participants served in both Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan ( $n = 28$ ; 23.9%), Operation Enduring Freedom only ( $n = 7$ ; 6.0%), other military operations/deployments ( $n = 4$ ; 3.4%), the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 ( $n = 2$ ; 1.7%), and the Korean War ( $n = 1$ ; 0.9%). Twenty-three respondents reported no deployments or operations ( $n = 23$ ; 19.7%).

## Measures

The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI; Mahalik et al., 2003) consists of 94 items and measures conformity to 11 traditional North American masculine norms (e.g., self-reliance, emotional control, dominance). Mahalik et al., (2003) found acceptable internal consistency ( $\alpha > .75$ ) and evidence of validity through associations with other measures of masculinity, such as the Gender Role Conflict Scale (O'Neil et al., 1986). In this study, the coefficient alpha was .93.

The Dispositional Resilience Scale-30 (DRS; Bartone, 1991; Bartone, Ursano, Wright, & Ingraham, 1989; Sutker, Davis, Uddo, & Ditta, 1995) consists of 30 items and measures hardiness. The DRS is comprised of three subscales: (a) Commitment (CM), or sense of meaning, purpose, and perseverance attributed to one's existence; (b) Control (CO), or sense of autonomy and ability to influence one's destiny and manage experiences; and (c) Challenge (CH), or perceptions of change as exciting growth opportunities. Consistent with Bartone's (1991) recommendations, the total DRS-30 score was used. Bartone (1999) reported acceptable criterion-related validity and internal consistency ( $\alpha > .70$ ), with coefficient alpha being .75 for the total scale in the present study.

The Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS; Ryff, 1989) measures individuals' positive self-concept and acceptance of self. The current study utilized three subscales: (a) Personal Growth tapping attitudes towards new experiences and self-improvement, (b) Purpose in Life tapping whether one has reasons to live, and (c) Environmental Mastery tapping beliefs about one's ability to manage one's life, affairs, and opportunities due to their theorized relations to the hardiness construct. Each subscale is composed of 14 items. Given concerns about the factorial independence of the subscales, a total psychological well-being score was used (consistent with the recommendation of Abbott and colleagues, 2006). Ryff found acceptable internal

consistency for the PWBS subscales ( $\alpha > .85$ ) and evidence of validity through associations with other measures of well-being, such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979).

In this study, the coefficient alpha was .94.

### **Procedures**

Participants were recruited from public and private universities, military colleges (e.g., Virginia Military Institute) and technical colleges across the US via e-mail. The Student Veterans of America, a coalition of student veterans groups from college campuses across the United States, also sent requests for participation via their listserv. The email invited potential participants to visit the survey via a hypertext link, where they could provide informed consent, complete demographic items, and the CMNI, DRS-30, and PWBS. Lastly, participants were shown debriefing information.

While 219 individuals accessed the first page of the survey, many ceased participation after the first set of items. Cases with more than 5% missing data ( $n = 98$ ) were dropped. Among these remaining 121 cases, small amounts of missing data (less than 5% on any subscale) were addressed using the subscale-mean substitution procedure (SPSS 19.0). Four univariate outlier cases and one multivariate outlier case were removed through examination of z-scores ( $> 3.29$ ) and Mahalanobis distances ( $> 39.49$ ), respectively, resulting in the final sample of 117 participants. The three main measures were found to be normally distributed.

### **Results**

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables in the main analyses appear in Table 1. Results indicate conformity to masculine norms was significantly *negatively* associated with psychological well-being in this male military veteran sample ( $r = -.31, p < .001$ ).



Barron and Kenny (1986) stated that three conditions must be met to establish mediation. First, the predictor (conformity to masculine norms) and criterion (psychological well-being) must be correlated. Second, the predictor (conformity to masculine norms) and proposed mediating variable (hardiness) must be correlated. Third, the correlation between the criterion variable (psychological well-being) and predictor (conformity to masculine norms) decreases either fully or partially when the mediator (hardiness) is entered into the model. Significant correlations among the three variables indicate that the first and second mediation conditions were met (see Table 1).

To test the third condition, we examined whether there were significant differences between two models: (a) a simple regression model wherein conformity to masculine norms predicted psychological well-being and (b) a multiple regression model wherein conformity to masculine norms and hardiness simultaneously predicted psychological well-being. After hardiness was added into the regression model, results indicated that conformity to masculine norms no longer accounted for a significant amount of the variance in psychological well-being,  $t(116) = -1.72, p = .088, \beta = -.12$ , suggesting that hardiness ( $\beta = .67$ ) totally mediated the effect of conformity to masculine norms on psychological well-being.

### **Discussion**

In this sample of male college-attending veterans, conformity to masculine norms was associated with lower psychological well-being, and this relation was fully mediated by their self-reported hardiness. In other words, greater conformity predicted lower hardiness (i.e., a weaker sense of purpose, autonomy, and “change as a growth opportunity”), which in turn predicted lower psychological well-being. For active-duty personnel, it is plausible that conforming to masculine norms is protective because it prepares them for the rigors of military

service (Cockerham, 1998; Grossman, 1996; Jolly, 1996). As previously stated, many masculine norms, such as physical toughness, courage, teamwork, competence, coping with stress, discipline, and dealing with pain and physical discomfort are necessary traits for the difficult job of fighting, surviving and accomplishing a wartime mission. Masculine norms also closely align with values emphasized in military service basic training, thus allowing active-duty personnel to be evaluated as performing well by their superiors and to be accepted by their peers (Drea, 1998). Such a hypothesis for this population might be supported by some research finding associations between conformity to masculine norms and positive outcomes (Hammer & Good, 2010). On the contrary, the present findings suggest that, for veterans who have made the transition to civilian life and are attending college, greater conformity to masculine norms is associated with lower psychological well-being, which is consistent with literature suggesting conformity to masculine norms is a risk factor for a host of negative outcomes in this population (e.g., Burns & Mahalik, 2011; Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, these results suggest that hardiness may be a primary mechanism by which greater conformity is associated with lesser well-being.

This study is not without limitations. First, participants were predominantly young white male student veterans, so the findings may not be applicable to the larger and more diverse population of male student veterans. Masculinity may have different meanings to veterans of different ages and ethnic backgrounds, so additional research is necessary to examine the generalizability of these findings men of color and older men. Secondly, almost two-thirds (62%) of the respondents served in either the Marine Corps or Army, branches of service with direct ground combat roles that may potentially emphasize more traditional masculine views of service grounded in physical fitness and ability to withstand distress. Other services may have a

different perspective on masculinity more focused on efficiency, organization, and competence (Higate, 2003). Third, the cross-sectional and correlational design of this study precludes assertions of causality among the studied constructs. Future research should utilize a longitudinal design to track the conformity and well-being of men from pre-enlistment to post-service to see how military training may impact conformity, hardiness, and well-being (e.g., Jackson, Thoemmes, Jonkmann, Ludtke, & Trautwein, 2012).

To better support male student veterans' psychological well-being, colleges may benefit from incorporating strengths-based perspectives in their services (Burns & Mahalik, 2011). In workshops with veterans, facilitators can help students let go of the conformity that has served them so well in the military. They can do so by naming all parts of this conformity; by helping students know the value this conformity has had to them and to our country; by helping students see the value of letting go of this conformity; and by finding ways, together, to let it go while still valuing the veterans' integrity. Campus counseling centers who wish to encourage treatment seeking among male veterans can distribute literature and offer social media messaging on campus which frames seeking help as an act of courage and strength, rather than weakness (Hammer & Vogel, 2010). Societies prepare developing young adults to perform as desired in the military. Societies also have responsibility to understand and assist these individuals with reintegrating well into society upon their return from service.

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Table 1.

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Between Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	M	SD
1. CMNI	-			1.54	0.26
2. DRS-30	-.29*			1.94	0.27
3. PWSB	-.31**	.71**	-	4.71	0.65

*Note.* CMNI = Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory; DRS-30 = Dispositional Resilience Scale-30; PWBS = Psychological Well-Being Scales.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .