

**The Role of Gender in Shaping Self-Perceptions of Sexual and Emotional Behaviour: A
Social Identity Perspective**

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Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Michael Clarke

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Summary

Gender is not simply a biologically determined classification but a socially constructed category that is enacted by, and also acts upon, the individual. Previous research has shown that the social category of gender can influence an individual's attitudes, behaviour and self-perception. Despite this, many researchers continue to see gender as a fixed, biologically determined category and seek to explain observed differences or particular behaviours as physiologically determined. The social identity approach holds that normative information regarding the social groups to which one belongs (i.e., group norms) is capable of influencing one's self-perception in order that it more closely aligns with such information. In line with the social identity approach, the three studies reported in this thesis investigated the role that gender norms may have on shaping attitudes and self-perception in areas in which perceptions of gender normativity may be a critical factor. These areas include: emotional functioning (Study 1), sexuality (Study 2) and sexual performance (Study3).

Study 1 examined the role of gender group norms in shaping self-perceptions of empathy and emotional intelligence in a sample of 330 male and female adults. Results indicated that when participants were not supplied any information on gender normative empathic functioning, as well as when the information suggested that women were superior to men in empathic skills, women rated themselves significantly higher than men on a self-report measure of empathy. When participants were supplied with information that suggested that men were superior to women in empathic skills, participants attuned their self-perceptions to match their gender group and there was no significant difference between men and women on the self-report measure of empathy. A similar pattern of results was found for emotional intelligence, however the predicted interaction effect failed to reach significance.

The second of our studies explored the effects of gender normativity on self-reports of same-sex attraction, behaviour and identity. A total of 416 male and female participants were either presented with information that suggested that bisexual attraction and behaviour were more normative for their particular gender than for the other gender, or were not supplied with any information regarding the gender normativity of bisexuality. Results indicated that men endorsed significantly more same-sex attraction when bisexuality was presented as normative for their gender. Gender normative information had no significant effect on men's perceptions of their sexual behaviour or identity, nor on women's perceptions of their sexual attraction, behaviour or identity. Results also revealed that increasing the gender normativity of bisexuality for men and women produced no significant differences in levels of prejudice toward either male or female bisexuals.

Study 3 examined the effect that variations in gender normative prototypical models of masculinity had on a sample of 140 male participants' dysfunctional sexual beliefs (e.g., the belief that an erection is essential for a successful sexual encounter) as well as perceptions of their own sexual dysfunction. Results indicated that models of 'traditional masculinity' (i.e., stereotypically macho) significantly increased the endorsement of sexually dysfunctional beliefs relative to models of modern masculinity and controls. Results also indicated that men exposed to traditionally masculine models reported lower levels of dysfunction due to performance failure than men exposed to models of more modern masculinity and controls. Manipulations to the masculine gender prototype produced no significant differences between men's perceptions of their sexual excitation or sexual inhibition due to external consequences.

Taken together, these findings provide evidence for the conception of gender as a social category and its ability to influence the individual. These findings also provide evidence for accounts of gender differences that take into account the role of social context in

shaping attitudes and self-perceptions. In line with the social identity approach, these findings also speak to the manner by which the social world shapes our sense of self and provides further evidence for a self-concept that is often fluid and shaped by the twin influences of category and context.