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EFFECTS OF INTENSIVE MEDITATION ON SEX-ROLE IDENTIFICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR A CONTROL MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH¹

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Summary.—This study assessed the impact of a 3-mo. meditation retreat on 15 respondents' self-perceived masculinity and femininity. As hypothesized, male and female subjects, who on pretest perceived themselves to be more stereotypically feminine than normative samples, on posttest reported a significant shift to even greater endorsement of feminine adjectives and less endorsement of masculine adjectives.

Although there is currently great interest in the application of Eastern and Western self-control strategies to a variety of clinical problems (Shapiro & Zifferblatt, 1976; Raskin, *et al.*, 1980; Shapiro, 1982) less attention has been paid to the vision of exceptional psychological health for which these techniques might be utilized (Walsh & Shapiro, *in press*; Nolan, 1972). Previous efforts to develop a model of psychological health interfacing both Eastern and Western cultural views^{3,4} suggest that a model may have considerable overlap with masculine and feminine sex-role stereotypes (Bem, 1974, 1977, 1981; Spence, *et al.*, 1975, 1979). To explore the overlap, this study assessed the effect of meditation on respondents' self-perceived masculinity and femininity. Although the Eastern traditions emphasize the concept of balancing active, energetic qualities with yielding, accepting ones, a meditation retreat emphasizes non-doing, being, and acceptance, qualities similar to the stereotypically feminine attributes. It was hypothesized that a meditation retreat would increase individuals' self-perceptions in a more stereotypically feminine direction and decrease the endorsement of certain stereotypically masculine self-perceptions.

¹A detailed report is on file with Microfiche Publications, P.O.B. 3513, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10017. For Document NAPS-03974 remit \$4.00 for fiche or \$11.35 for photocopy.

²Correspondence should be addressed to Dr. Shapiro, c/o University of California Irvine Medical Center, 101 City Drive, Orange, California 92668.

³D. Shapiro, E. Peper, M. Harr, & S. Carrere, Toward a four-quadrant model of self-control: positive and negative aspects of assertiveness and yielding. (Under editorial review)

⁴D. Shapiro, Reliability of a four-quadrant model of self-control: ratings by experts in Type A behavior—health psychology; East/West psychology; and sex-role psychology. (Under editorial review)

METHOD

Subjects were 25 individuals attending a 3-mo. meditation retreat where meditation was practiced up to 16 hours a day. The type of meditation was Vipassana, a Buddhist practice, in which the individual focuses primarily on breathing but also attempts to notice precisely other thoughts, sensations, and feelings that become salient. Twelve men and 13 women completed the pretest, about 25% of those attending the retreat. Of this group, 6 men and 9 women also filled out the posttest. Thus the attrition rate was 40%. The mean age for men was 27.3 yr. and for women 31.6 yr. The group was moderately well-educated, and all but one of the subjects who completed both pre- and posttests had had some college. There were a high percentage of unemployed, students, and part-time workers so the sample was highly self-selected.

Subjects were administered the Bem Sex-role Inventory prior and subsequent to the 3-mo. retreat. The Bem inventory asks respondents to rate themselves on a 7-point Likert scale in terms of 40 words defined as socially desirable in contemporary American society. Twenty of these words are stereotypically masculine, 20 stereotypically feminine.

RESULTS

For the 15 subjects, on 20 words designated masculine scores for 13 words decreased while those for 6 words increased from pre- to posttest. On the 20 feminine words scores for 14 increased and for 5 scores decreased (corrected $\chi_1^2 = 5.17$, $p \leq .05$). In terms of specific words, subjects perceived themselves as significantly less independent (a masculine word) and significantly more sympathetic (a feminine word) at posttest ($p \leq .05$). Women also perceived themselves as significantly more compassionate (a feminine word) at posttest ($p \leq .05$). The study provided some support for the initial hypothesis, although its exploratory nature did not permit clarification of why the expected changes occurred on certain words and not on others in the lists.

The study also provided additional refinement to the pretest profile of individuals attracted to meditation (Stek & Bass, 1973) in that when the pretest means of men and women from this study were compared with Bem's normative scores (Bem, 1974), we see that the women attracted to a meditation retreat were slightly more stereotypically feminine than the normative female sample (this study $M = 5.23$; Bem study $M = 5.01$). The men attracted to the retreat were also considerably more feminine and less masculine in their endorsement of sex-stereotypic words than Bem's normative male sample (this study, masculine $M = 4.54$; Bem study, masculine $M = 4.97$; this study, feminine $M = 5.11$; Bem study, feminine $M = 4.44$). Further, in an interesting cross-sex pattern, women on the meditation retreat had a higher mean score than males on 9 of 20 masculine words, with willing to take a stand significant

($p \leq .05$), and men having higher mean scores on four of 20 feminine words, with no harsh language achieving significance ($p \leq .05$).⁵

Because the sample was self-selected, the N small, attrition large, the results must be interpreted with caution. Partial support for the initial hypothesis is provided; there may be certain overlap between stereotypically feminine words and many of the philosophical views espoused by an Eastern ideal of self-control. It is interesting that the men attracted to the retreat showed high "feminine" scores, but whether this is a result of prior meditation, or a "predisposing" characteristic of men attracted to meditation cannot be assessed. Expectations of individuals prior to a meditation retreat as well as satisfaction at the end of the retreat should be assessed to determine whether the changes are those which the individuals themselves perceive as desirable. Further, development of an assessment test which would be more congruent with the value system of the meditation disciplines, including both undesirable and desirable qualities, is needed. Then follow-up should assess whether the changes during the retreat generalize to the real world.

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