

# Stronger reaction to masculinity threats tied to testosterone, sociologist says

April 17 2013, by Brooke Donald

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Phys.org) —We've all heard it before: if a guy is made to feel less than manly, he'll act even more macho to make up for it. Now, new research suggests that this behavior may have something to do with how much testosterone a man has.

Robb Willer, an associate professor of sociology at Stanford, has been studying [masculinity](#) since he was a [graduate student](#), lending [empirical data](#) to the popular beliefs about emasculation.

In one of his first inquiries into the subject, back in 2005, he found that [men](#) whose masculinity is threatened express more masculine traits and behaviors. For example, Willer has found that threatened men show stronger support for war and greater interest in buying an SUV – attitudes and behaviors culturally associated with masculinity.

Willer's new research follows up on that earlier study, finding that men higher in [testosterone](#) are more easily threatened, engaging in masculine overcompensation in response.

Willer describes the results in "Overdoing Gender: A Test of the Masculine Overcompensation Thesis," published in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

The paper includes four studies examining the theory of male overcompensation – that men react to the undermining of their masculine status with bold demonstrations of strength and masculinity. The most recent study investigates testosterone's role.

To conduct the study, researchers enlisted 54 undergraduate men at the University of Iowa. The men took a [gender identity](#) survey in which they were asked questions about their assertiveness or other qualities typically associated with masculinity or [femininity](#).

They were then given feedback that the men believed was based on the survey but in fact was random. Some of the men were told their answers indicated more feminine traits. Others were told the answers indicated more masculine behavior. Then they were surveyed again on a variety of political and cultural views.

The men's [saliva](#) was collected at different points in the study allowing their testosterone levels to be measured.

The research revealed that men with higher levels of testosterone show the strongest overcompensation response, Willer said. Higher testosterone men showed greater increases on masculine attitudes like support for war and negative views of homosexuality after being told their answers indicated more feminine traits. Lower testosterone men showed no effects when similarly threatened.

"Masculine overcompensation in men appears to be driven by men with moderate to high testosterone levels," Willer said. "Their levels of support for war and homophobia practically doubled on the scale that we measured them on, where lower testosterone men were unaffected by threats."

Willer said the results do not suggest that men with higher testosterone levels are always more aggressive or dominant. The relationship between testosterone and macho behavior shows itself when triggered by a threat or provocation, Willer said.

"There appears to be a very strong effect when a high testosterone man's status is threatened," Willer said. "However, when not threatened, we saw no differences in the attitudes of men with different testosterone levels."

Willer said there is still more to be done to unravel the reasons men overcompensate, including whether it's behavior to reassure themselves or prove to society their manliness. He said future studies should also look cross-culturally, and examine whether the same theory could materialize for women in certain contexts.

**More information:** [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/6 ... =JSTOR-](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/6...=JSTOR-)

[HTMLeTOCAAlert](#)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Stronger reaction to masculinity threats tied to testosterone, sociologist says (2013, April 17) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-stronger-reaction-masculinity-threats-tied.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.