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Maybe Big Boys Do Cry

An Examination of Male College Students' Reactions to Situations of Competitive Loss

SURF Conference Panel Session 8

By: Tagart Sobotka

Mentor: Brian Powers, Lecturer, Sociology

Introduction

- In the United States, gender norms and relations are shifting, and conventional definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman are being challenged on multiple fronts.^{1,2}
- Some have claimed that this shift is potentially harmful for men, arguing that men are often trapped within the conventional definitions of masculine identity, which are built upon competition and dominance due to social pressure and/or biological predispositions.^{3,4}
- If this is the case, and a man's masculine identity is built upon and trapped within a foundation of competition and domination, then situations of competitive loss should pose a challenge to a man's masculine identity.

1 H. Rosin. "The End of Men." *The Atlantic*, July/August 2010.

2 R. W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005), 829–859.

3 William Pollack. *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (New York, New York: Holt, Henry & Company, Inc., 1999).

4 Christina H. Sommers. *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming our Young Men* (New York City, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

Research Question

- How do male college students respond to situations of competitive loss?

To begin answering this overarching question, I have investigated the following questions:

- 1) Does being outperformed by a competitor in an academic setting cause mood change in men?
- 2) Does the identity of the competitor affect men's mood differently?
- 3) Do men with different conventional gender traits respond differently to competitive loss?

Methodology

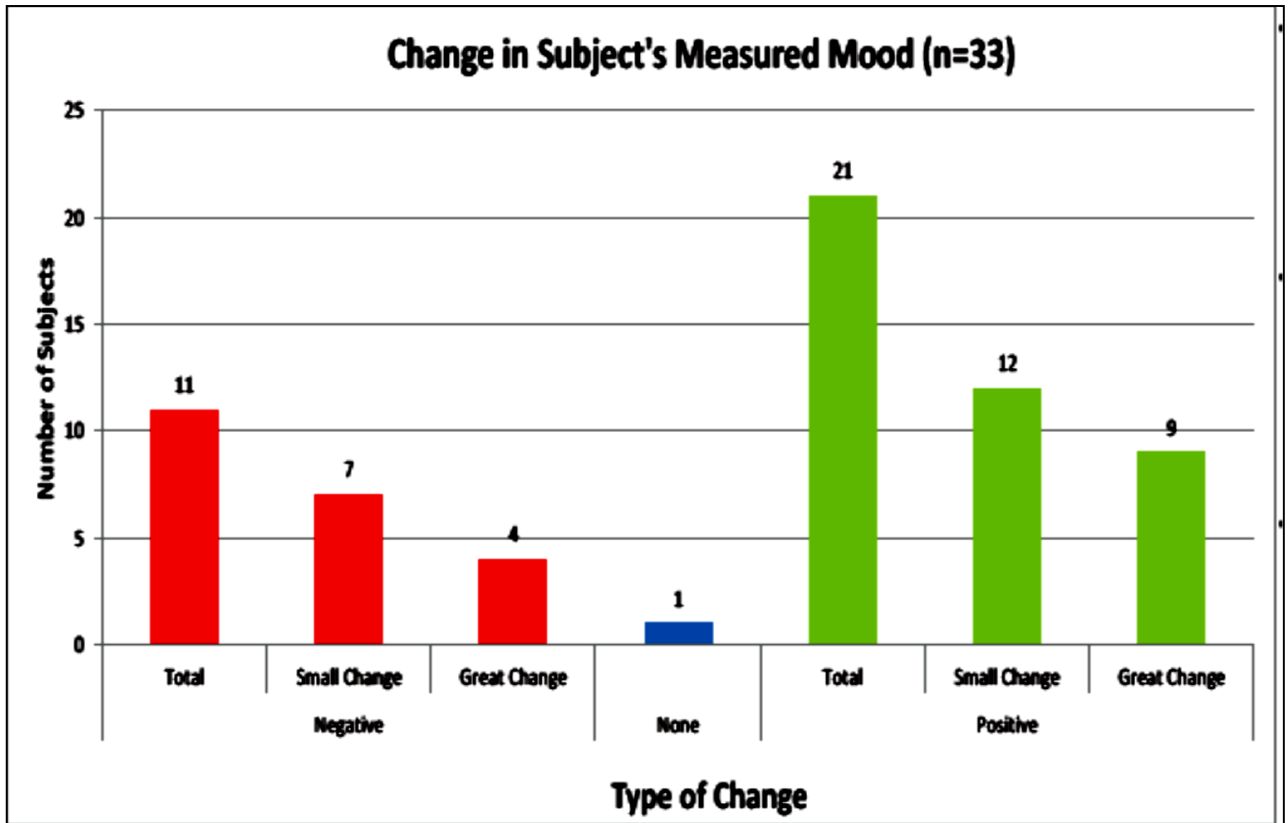
- Thirty-three male subjects between the ages of 18 and 25 were recruited to take part in what they thought was a study on interdisciplinary problem solving skills.
- During the screening process, subjects completed the Bem-Sex Role Inventory-Short Form (BSRI), which categorized subjects into one of four categories (Masculine, Feminine, Androgynous, or Undifferentiated) based upon their self-reported possession of conventional gender traits.⁵
- During each trial, subjects received lower scores on timed problem-solving tests than a woman (Treatment Group 1), a presumptively heterosexual male, (Treatment Group 2), or an implicitly homosexual male confederate (Treatment Group 3).
- Mood-Congruent Judgment Scales were used to measure the subject's mood before and after receiving the lower timed test scores.⁶
- Scores from the Mood-Congruence Judgment Scales determined whether or not the subject's mood changed after being outperformed by the confederate.

5 S. L. Bem. *Bem Sex Role Inventory Professional Manual* (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1981).

6 J. D. Mayer and E. Hanson. "Mood-Congruent Judgment Over Time." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 21 (1995): 237-244.

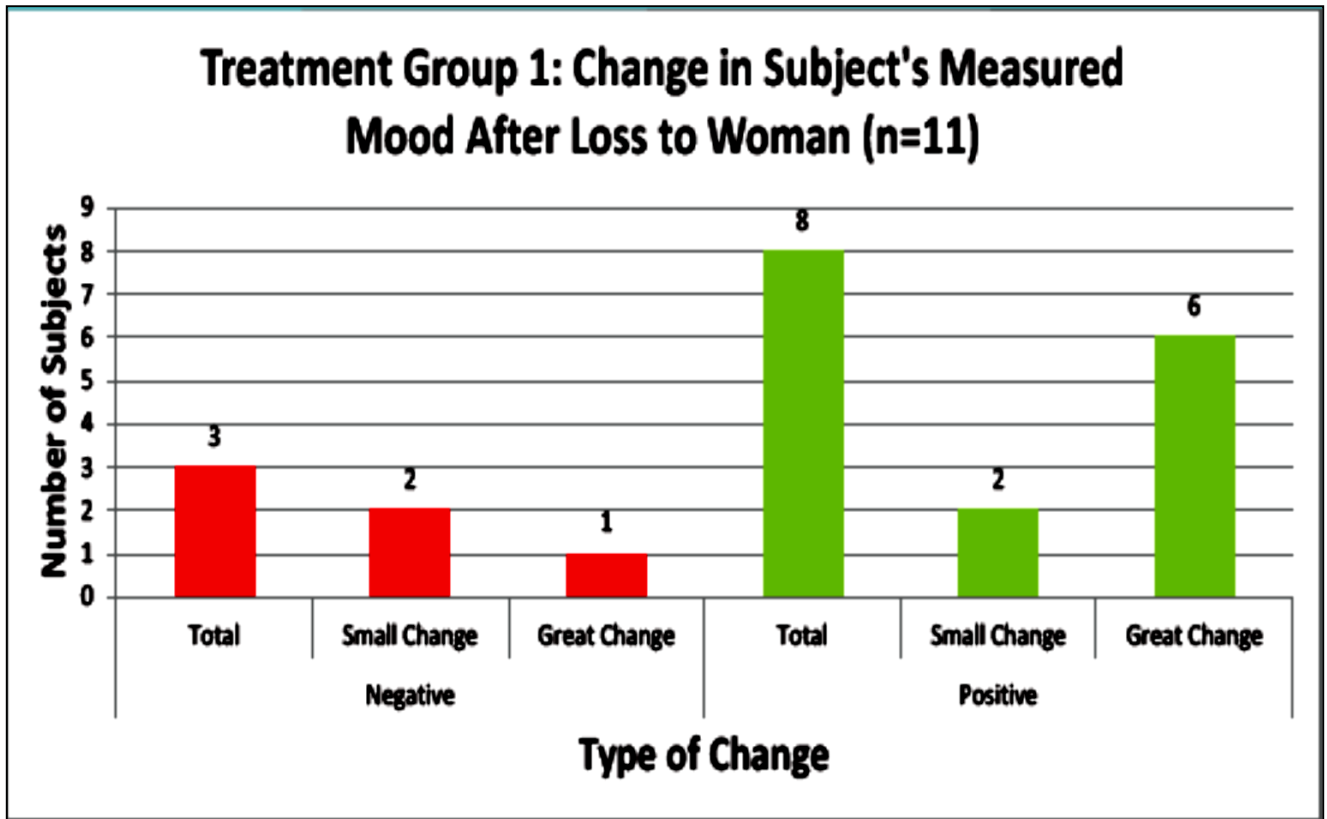
Results

Did being outperformed by a competitor in an academic setting cause mood change in men?



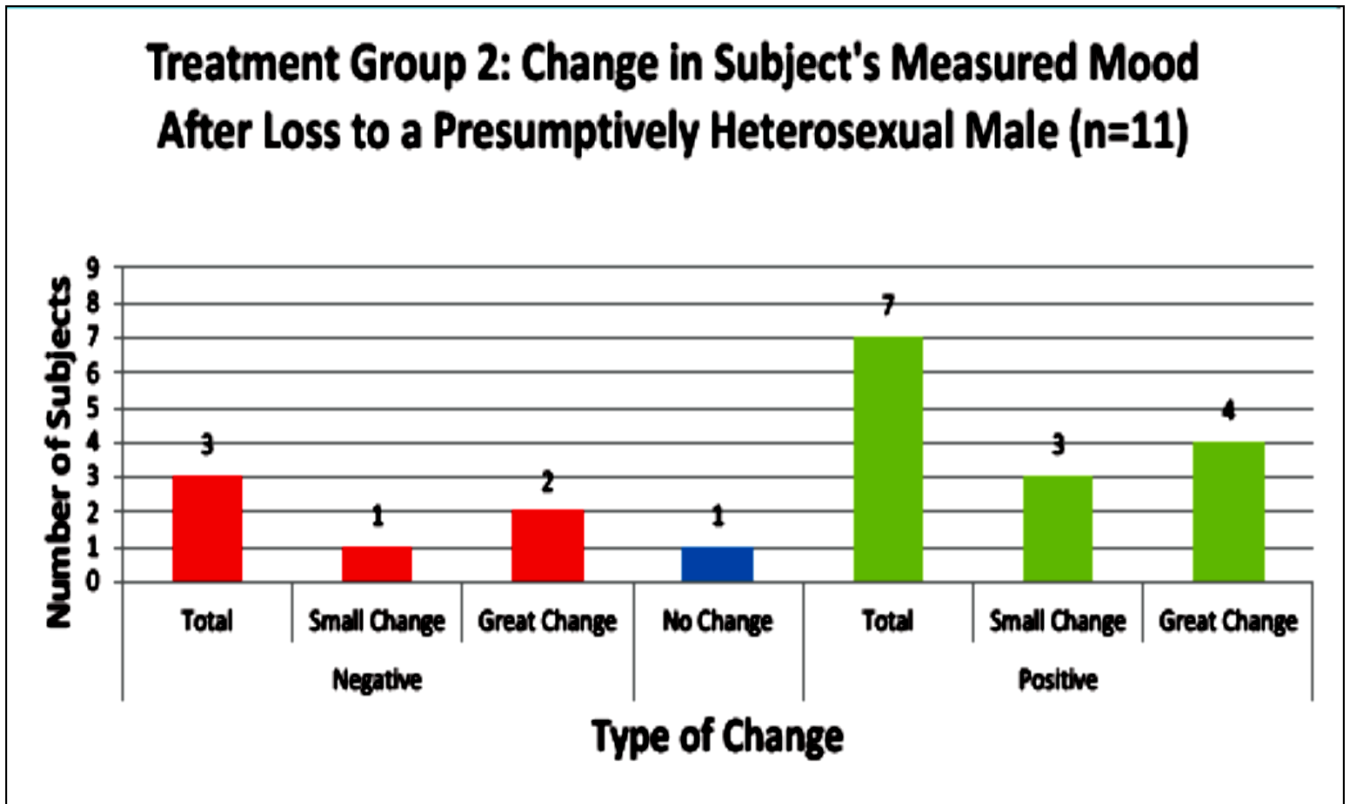
- Changes in mood scores ranged from an increase of 20 points to a decrease of 18 points.
- For each subject who showed negative change in mood, nearly two showed an increase in mood.
- The number of subjects with only small mood changes was over half of the total population.

Did the identity of the competitor affect men's mood differently?



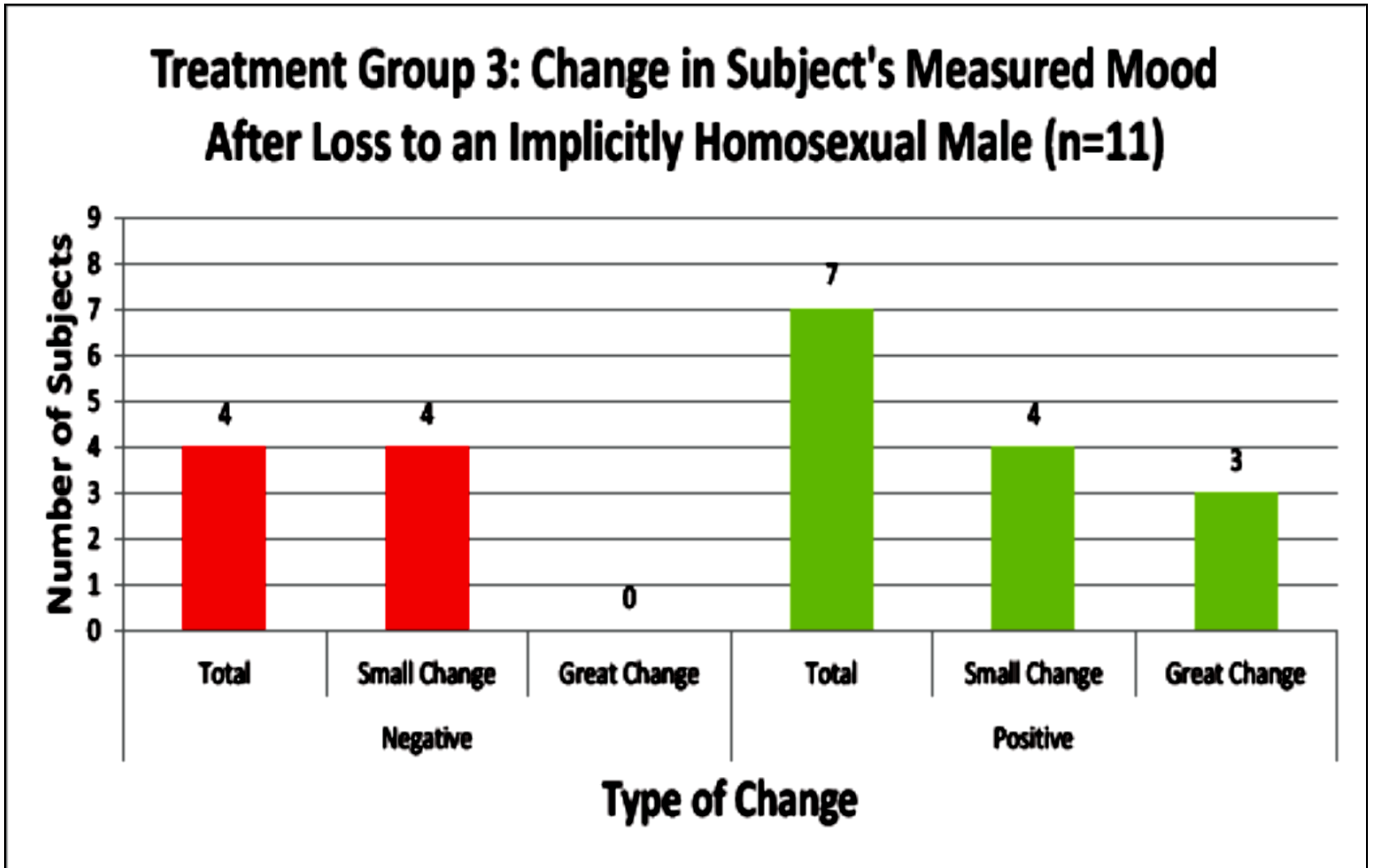
- Changes ranged from an increase of 14 points to a decrease of 18 points.
- The pattern of negative change resembled that of the whole population.
- Loss to a woman caused the largest amount of positive mood change.

Did the identity of the competitor affect men's mood differently?



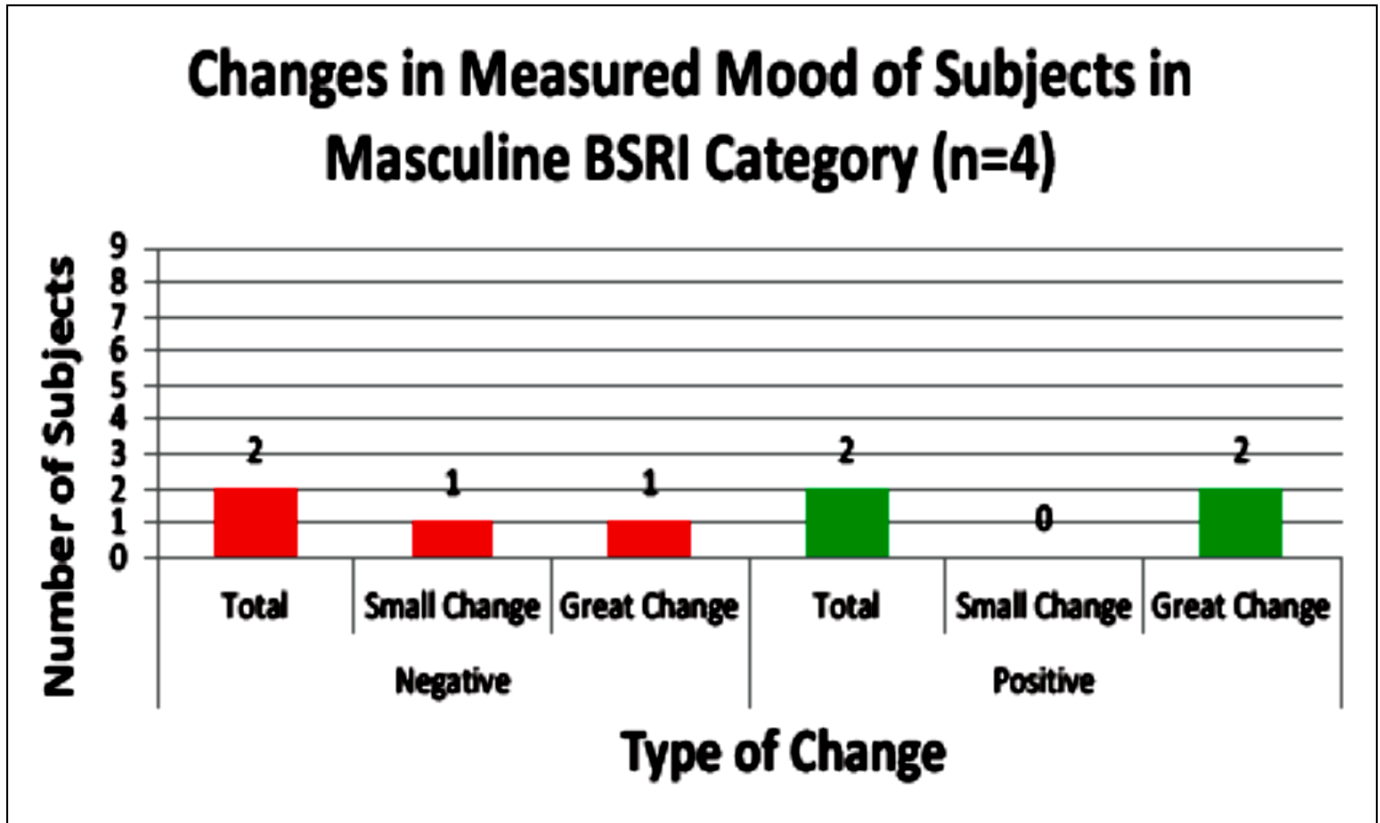
- Changes ranged from an increase of 20 points to a decrease of 18 points.
- Loss to presumptively heterosexual male led to the largest amount of great negative change.

Did the identity of the competitor affect men's mood differently?



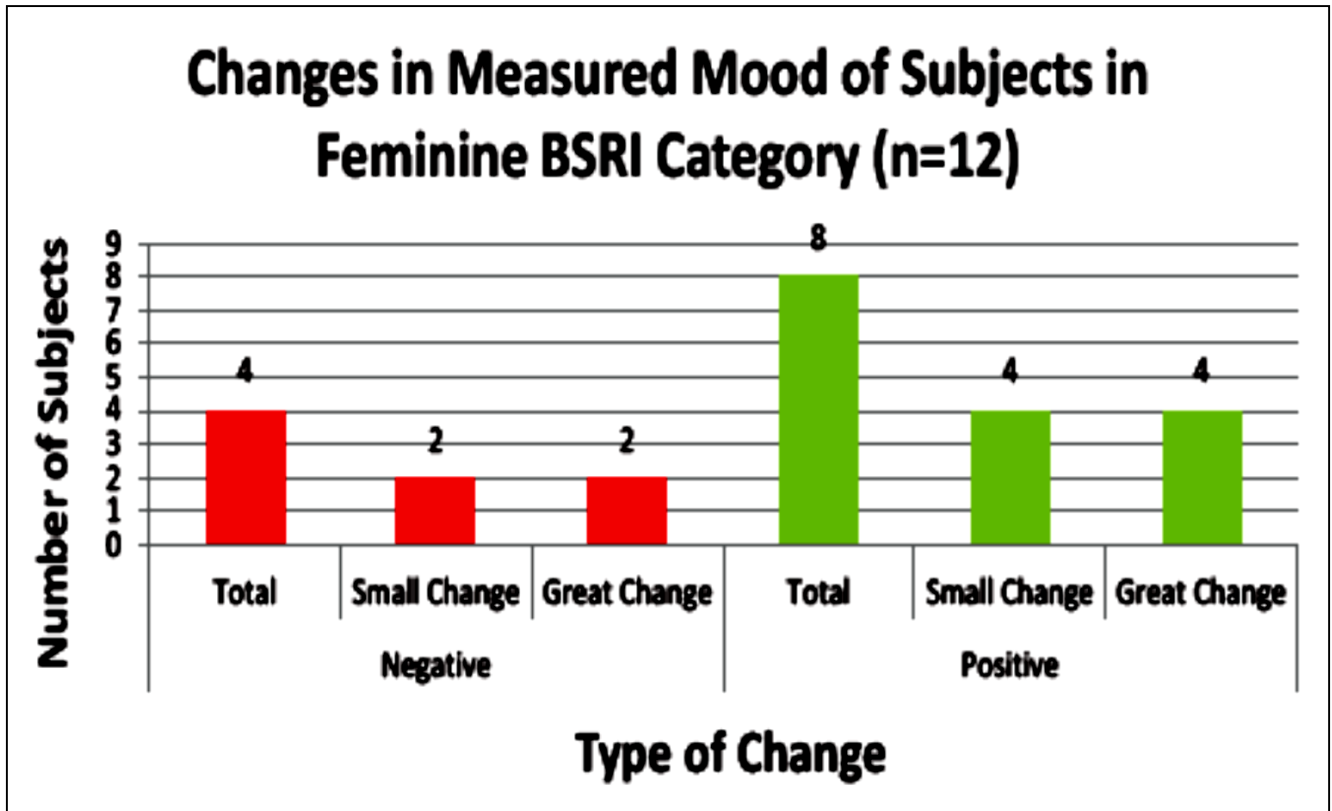
- Changes ranged from an increase of 10 points to a decrease of only two points.
- Loss to an implicitly homosexual male led to the least amount of great change.
- The pattern of positive change resembled that of the whole population.

Did men with different conventional gender traits respond differently to competitive loss?



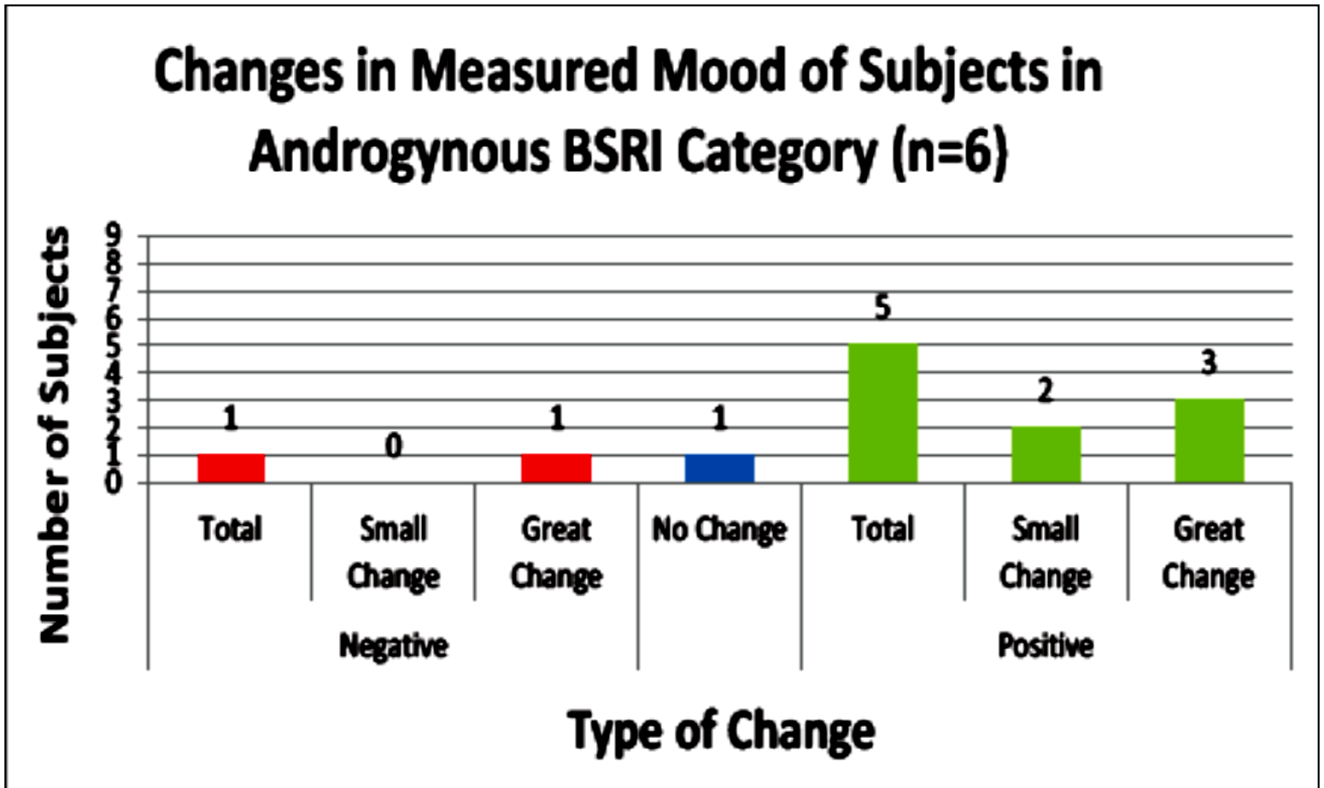
- The masculine BSRI category was the smallest group.
- They had the greatest range of change of all the categories.
- Men in this group showed the largest proportion of great change in mood.

Did men with different conventional gender traits respond differently to competitive loss?



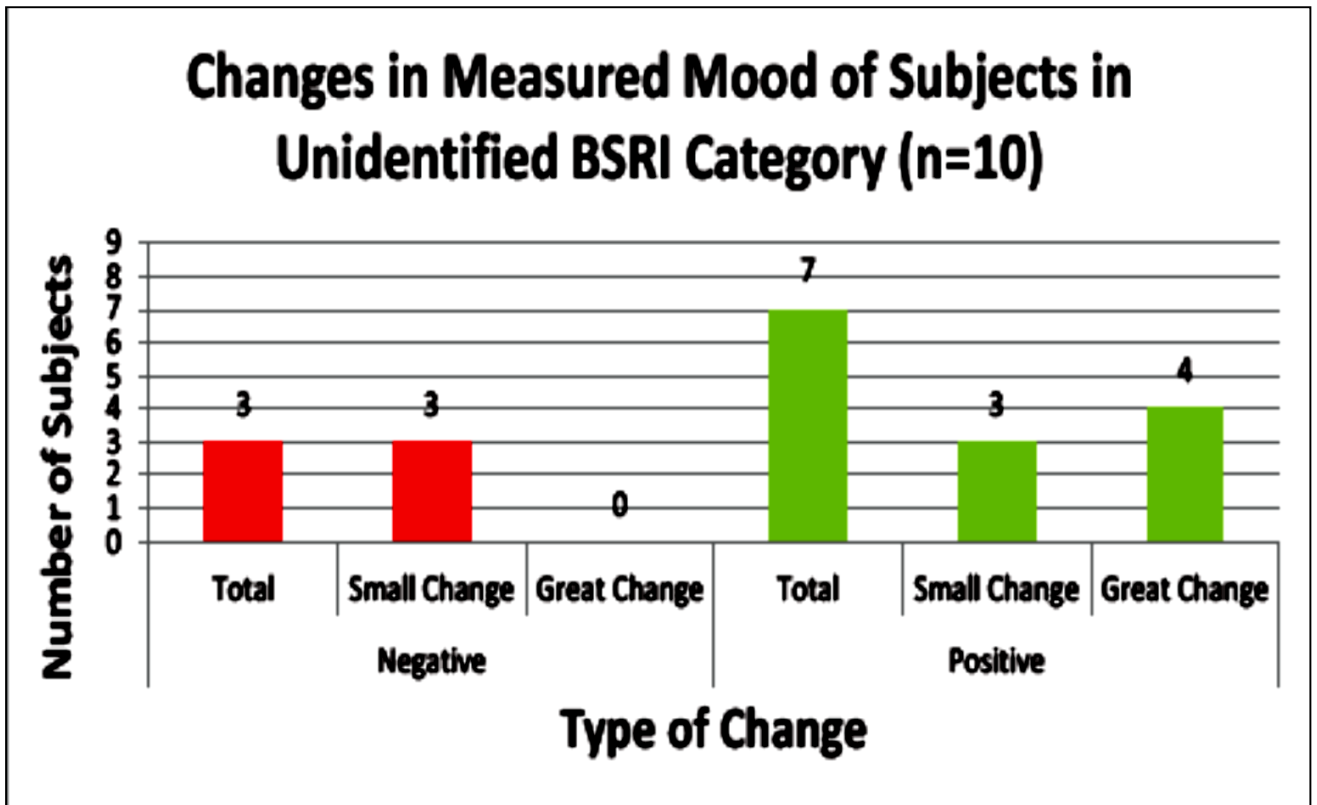
- Feminine was the largest of the groups.
- In this group, positive and negative change were proportional, with positive change twice as frequent.
- The pattern of negative change reflected that of the masculine group.

Did men with different conventional gender traits respond differently to competitive loss?



- Androgynous men showed the largest proportion of positive change of all categories.
- They showed the smallest amount of negative change.
- The amount of great mood change was twice that of small mood change.

Did men with different conventional gender traits respond differently to competitive loss?



- The unidentified group did not show any great negative change.
- Their mood change was mostly small.
- Total positive to negative change ratios were similar to the population as a whole.

Discussion/Conclusion

- All subjects except one showed a change in mood.
- The majority of subjects showed a positive change in mood.
- Loss to any of the three confederates did not appear to produce large differences in patterns of change in mood.
- More men showed positive mood change than negative mood change in the feminine, androgynous, and unidentified Bem-Sex Role Inventory categories. However, in the masculine category, an equal number of men showed negative and positive mood change.
- While further research needs to be done, the majority of men actually showed a positive increase in their mood despite who they lost to, suggesting that, at least in academic settings, college men may have developed a masculine identity not built upon a foundation of competition and domination that some have argued is inherent in all men.

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