Maybe Big Boys Do Cry
An Examination of Male College Students’ Reactions to Situations of Competitive Loss

SURF Conference Panel Session 8
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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.

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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.


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 an 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.
Bibliography


Author Acknowledgments

Hector Callejas
Lok Siu, Ethnic Studies Department
Margot Pérez, COPONAPN
Pedro Rodríguez, COPONAPN
Elizando Umaña, Centro Cultural Techantit
Center for Race and Gender, UC Berkeley
Timo Rodríguez, SURF L&S
Unión Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios
Dirección Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas, El Salvador
Jack Atherton

Kiara Covarrubias  Special thanks to my advisor Professor Ivonne del Valle for her patience and support. Also, I would like to acknowledge all the undocumented authors not only for their bravery in entering this country, but also for holding their heads up high and having the courage to publish their stories. Thank you to my family and the support team in the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program. This project would not have been possible without their help.

Emily Doyle  As a recipient of the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship, I am honored for the opportunity to pursue and develop my research inquiry. Ideally, the larger implications of my findings will help to establish a critical analysis of the phrase "as if," providing a way to examine works of other authors bearing the same or similar word usage, as well as allowing a point of access to a certain dimension of fictionality crucial for how the novel implicates operations of the mind.

I am personally grateful for the brilliant attention of my mentor, Professor Charles Altieri, the help of whom never fails to challenge and inspire, as well as for the hard work and attention to each researcher (including myself) on the part of SURF mentor, Timo Rodriguez, and Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research, Leah Carroll.

Alina Enoiu  A big thanks to Professor Margaret Weir, the SURF program, and Timo Rodriguez for helping me turn my passion for health into a research project. I could never have done this without your support and inspiration.

Scott Farley  I would like to thank the following people for supporting my research: The Pergo Fund for providing generous financial support; Berkeley SURF L&S for providing mentorship, guidance, and motivation throughout the summer; and Nina Oakley at the Western Regional Climate Center for providing access to the immense database of hourly climatic and fuel moisture records. Finally, this project would not have been possible without the support of my project mentor, John Radke, who provided technical guidance and motivation throughout the course of my SURF Fellowship.
Fikreselam Habebo  I would like to thank all the people who have guided me, supported me and encouraged me to investigate the condition of Ethiopian migrant workers in Lebanon. My appreciation first goes to Selam Teshome who shared with me stories of horror and instilled in me the curiosity to rethink about migrant workers and my mentor Temi Ogunyoku for being the best role model. Then my sister, Emnet Habebo, who took this mustard seed of an idea and connected me with our childhood friend Mihiret Samuel, who later became my host, my primary informant and best friend. To Mihiret goes my upmost respect and honor. Thank you Mihiretiye for your patience, for your love and for letting me into your home, your friendships and your experiences. An extended thank you also to the ladies I lived with Helen, Messi, and Amina.

My gratitude goes to Timo Rodriguez who helped me put my passion and instincts into words and strategies. I always tell my friends that the transformative process of working with Timo alone would have been worthy enough even without the expedition abroad. Thank you for your energy, enthusiasm and the sense of community and comradeship you instilled in us SURFers. To the director of Undergraduate Research Leah Caroll, thank you for the hope you gave me when moving forward seemed bleak and impossible. Donald Moore, my advisor, thank you for boosting my ego and for setting the foundations for me to pursue research. I appreciate the time you have spent thus far discussing and editing with me.

Last but never least thank you to my immediate family, my friends and my church family for supporting me through comforting phone calls and prayers.

Wendy Hernandez  This work would not have been possible without the students who shared with me their stories; the strength and valor you encompass is humbling. Thank you for trusting me with your stories—this is dedicated to you! A huge thanks to Brian Powers for supporting me since day one, my graduate mentor Timo Rodriguez for being my motivator, and my faculty sponsor Victoria Robinson for believing in my work undoubtedly. My mother Cilia Hernandez, siblings Victor and Odalis Hernandez who dealt with my research madness, and my line sister Angelica Inguanzo who was my poster formatter also played important roles in the success of this work. Thank you to the Get On The Bus DeCal staff and class or enlightening me on carceral and family issues, the Human Rights of the

Incarcerated Coalition (HRIC) for the continuous reminder that the fight for humanizing carceral issues is just getting started, and my beloved DeLTA Omicron chapter for the unconditional support—it takes a village, THANK YOU!

Hai Hoang  I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Professor Kaiping Peng, my faculty mentor, and Feng Yu, my graduate-student mentor for their helpful and detailed guidance throughout this research. My sincere thanks are also extended to Professors Oliver John and Ayduk Ozlem, Ph. D candidates Scott Roeder and Daniel Cordaro, and Berkeley graduates Galen McNeil and David Chen for their constructive feedbacks. In addition, I would like to show my deepest appreciation to the generous Pergo fund and the dedicated SURF staff—Timo Rodriguez, Nathan Shih, and Dr. Leah Caroll—for providing the valuable resources and constant support over the summer. Last but not least, I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude and love to my parents and my girlfriend for their understanding, endless patience, and encouragement during my time at UC Berkeley.
Nada Hosking

Anthropology Department at UC Berkeley:

- Dr. Lisa Maher for her tremendous support, advice, and mentorship.
- Dr. Margaret Conkey, Professor Emerita, for generously sharing her knowledge, time, and books.

History of Art Department at UC Berkeley:

- Professor Whitney Davis for his guidance.

Museum staff in France:

- Musée de la Préhistoire, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, Dordogne
- Musée d'Aquitaine, Bordeaux
- Musée d'Archaéologie Nationale, Paris

The Leadership Fund Donors for financial support.

SURF organizers especially Leah Carroll and Timo Rodriguez for their guidance and encouragement.

SURF Fellows, especially Suzanne Ubick and Nicole Lang, for their constructive criticism and helpful edits.

Christopher Hosking for his undying love and support

Kamyar Jarahzadeh  First and foremost, I thank the Coordination Group of Afghan Refugees and all of those in Turkey who bravely shared their personal experiences to help build this research. I would like to give particular thanks to Ali and Zakira Hekmat for their patience and courage. My deepest gratitude is also extended to the SURF Program and my mentor Clare Talwalker for facilitating this research. I also thank the Söyler and Yıldırım families for their constant support throughout my stay in Turkey. Finally, many thanks to UC Berkeley EAP and my own family for helping facilitate the early stages of this research.

Andrew King  I thank Robert Hass especially for his guidance over the course of this project. I owe gratitude to Leah Carroll, Timo Rodriguez, John Briscoe, and Tim Noakes—as well the rest of the staff at Stanford's Green Library Special Collections and UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library. Thanks also to Tiffany Ku for her suggestions regarding, and edits to, these proceedings.

Hussin Kordi  I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Faye Gabriel and the community at the Feed My Sheep Food Pantry for their warm hospitality and enthusiastic engagement during my visits, as well as Reverend Daniel Buford of the Allen Temple Baptist Church for his mentoring and assistance in locating this space to conduct my research fellowship. I would like to thank my faculty sponsor, Professor Clare Talwalker, for offering her guidance and patience since day one. I would like to acknowledge the encouragement and endless support from Timo Rodriguez and Leah Carroll from the Office of Undergraduate Research—without whom, none of this would have been possible. Finally, I'd like to express my appreciation for my friends and family, whose contributions to my academic and personal growth are simply immeasurable.
Tiffany Ku  I would like to thank my mentor, Michael Mascuch, for the invaluable guidance he gave me throughout this process. In addition, I would like to thank the SURF program for their support, in particular the donors who make the program possible and my fellow cohort who made the experience worthwhile.

Nicole Lang  I would like to thank the Sumer Undergraduate Research Fellowship as well as the JSB fund for providing the funding and support that made this research possible this summer. I would also like to thank my mentor, Dr. Lisa Maher, for her time, knowledge, and generosity, and Casto Vocal, a Senior Lecturer in the School of Computing and Engineering at the University of Huddersfield, for his consultations and endless guidance. I would like to thank Leah Carroll and Timo Rodriguez for their time and support during the research process. Special thanks to Jerome O’Neal who introduced me to lithic technologies and continues to encourage me to keep going through the process. I would like to extend my gratitude to Nada Hosking, Suzanne Ubick, and Thane Swigart for their contributions and edits in all stages of this project. And finally, thanks to my fellow SURF scholars who contributed their thoughts and suggestions to my work over the time we have spent together.

Robynne Lindsey  I would like to thank SURF for providing me the opportunity to develop and conduct my own research this past summer. I would like to specifically thank Timo Rodriguez, Wendy Sinek, and my advisor Eric Schickler for their encouragement and support.

Julissa Muñiz  First and foremost, I would like to thank my amazing mentor, Professor Keith Feldman, for his guidance and constant support throughout the research process. I first met Professor Feldman in Spring 2011 while taking an Ethnic Studies methodologies course. Thereafter, he has continuously challenged me both academically and personally. I would also like to thank Professor Carlos Muñoz who has been my mentor since Fall 2010, when I first found myself in his office wanting to know more about Ethnic Studies and the Afro-Mexican identity. Without truly knowing me, he believed in me as an academic and muxer. I would also like to thank the womyn at the California Coalition of Women Prisoners who opened up their space and hearts to a young sister because none of this would have been possible without their stories. Last but not least, thank you to my friends and family who continue to support me through my academic and personal endeavors. Specifically, I would like to thank my little freedom fighter Amaris who is my biggest inspiration in life. This is all for you baby girl.

Nikolay Nichiporuk

- Professor Dana Carney, Haas School of Business, for her patience, mentorship and constant support.
- All the researchers at Social and Nonverbal Behavior Lab.
- Professors Bibb Latané and John Darley, the pioneers of the research on bystander effect.
- Professor Peter Fischer, University of Regensburg, whose own research on the bystander effect inspired this project.

Staff at Haas School of Business – Silva Kurtisa, Rosemary Alonso, Kendall Dockham, and Martin Eyestone, for your help with logistics and organization.
Ben Reuveni

Dr. Matthew Crossley  
Prof. Richard Ivry  
Prof. Gregory Ashby (U.C. Santa Barbara)  
U.C Berkeley (SURF)  
Nathan Shih  
Leah Carroll

Yunhee Roh  Many thanks to my mentor, Professor John Lie and many other sociology professors, including Ann Swidler and Irene Bloemraad. Warm thanks to Sociology graduate students, Laura Nelson, Andy Chang, Yang Lor and Sun Kim for their priceless advice in many directions for pursuing my research. Also, I owe great thanks to Seoul National University for allowing me to present my work at Gender Studies Forum. Last but not least, I sincerely appreciate Leah Caroll, Timo Rodriguez and all other SURF staff to make everything possible.

Adriana Sanchez-Pillot  I would like to thank the SURF Program for the opportunity to carry out my undergraduate research project. I am grateful to my mentors, William Hanks and Sean McFarland for making this possible: their encouragement and support have been fundamental for my intellectual development. My deep gratitude also goes for the residents of San Juan del Bosque that allowed me to work with them, to the Fray Bartolome de Las Casas Human Rights Center for their guidance, to my family for their support, and to my dear friends Ana Lopez and Adrian Reynoso for always being there, en las buenas y en las malas.

Anita Satish  I am grateful to my PI, Allison Harvey, for her support, guidance, and invaluable input in designing this study. Many thanks also to my graduate student mentor, Jason Lee, for his time, patience, and for assisting me throughout this process, and to Niki Gumport for all her helpful discussions and advice. Finally, I’d like to thank to my SURF advisors, Leah, Nathan, and Timo for their support, and SURF L&S for giving me the opportunity to pursue my research interests.

Gabriel Schwartzman  This research project was a collaboration between my dearest friends Adam Moskowitz, Sandra Stibitz, Jackson Wilke, and Tessa Marie Shippy – the project and this research would not have been without each member's contribution. I would like to thank Prof. Ignacio Chapela for supporting the project and giving sound and stable advice through the process, as well as Prof. Jake Kosek for pushing me to challenge myself in this work, and Prof. Nancy Peluso for helping me ground the research in questions about real people. I also owe much to Prof. Laurel Larson for her technical and methodological help developing the research and at critical points in the field – with her help the project would have been one-dimensional. A thank you to the Wishek Fund, and Timo Rodriguez for pushing me to critically analyze race and space in a small amount of time. Finally, and so importantly, I am indebted to the kind people along the Potomac River who housed us and allowed us to interview them for this research. Especially, we owe so much to the Westernport Heritage Society, and Pat McCarty particularly, the Panorama at the Peak, and Patty Miller especially, and the Charles County African American Heritage Society and Dorothea Smith for the unending support and kindness we were received with.
Pablo Seward  I would like to thank the SURF program (in particular Timothy Rodriguez and Leah Carroll) for the funding and guidance that made this project possible. I would also like to thank Professor Stefania Pandolfo, whose instruction provided my project with a solid theoretical foundation. I have also been privileged to obtain academic advise from William Hanks, Nelson Graburn, Charles Briggs, and Marisol de la Cadena. My deepest acknowledgments go to the Rapa Nui people who generously shared with me their amazing experiences and knowledge: Eddie Tuki and family, Marisol Hito, Te Pou Huke, Piru Huke, Hapa Tepano, Rodrigo Paoa, Sorobabel Fati, Edgard Hereveri, Robinson and Pincho Tepano, Graciela Huke, Sergio Rapu, Pau Hereveri, Leonardo Pakarati, Isabel Pakarati, Felipe Pakarati, Sebastián Paoa, Joel Huke, Petero Huke, Sonia Haoa, and many others. I would also like to give deep thanks to Jacinta Arthur and Edmund Edwards, resident scholars who were also extremely generous with their knowledge and their connections on the island.

Tagart Sobotka  Special thanks to the following for all their support:

- Professor Brian Powers
- Andrew Thrasher
- Lisa Egan
- Professor Robb Willer
- Cristina Rojas
- UC Berkeley Sociology Department
- Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program

Suzanne Ubick

- Dr. Lisa Maher, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, for generous investments of time and knowledge, and intense interest in my project.
- Leah Carroll, for her dedication to the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship program, and her willingness to answer endless questions.
- The Bullard Fund for financial support.
- Timothy Rodriguez for direction.
- Nada Hosking and Nicole Lang for informed critique and unfailing support.
- Darrell Ubick for consultation on speciation theory.
- Pablo Seward for his thoughtful editing of my paper.

Huyen Vo  I would like to thank the SURF program for giving me this opportunity to conduct my research. Thank you Timo Rodriguez for being an excellent mentor and a friend. Most of all, I would like to thank Dr. Ruth Rimmer for being an invaluable informal mentor who guided and encouraged me throughout this burn research endeavor. Finally, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my friend Aaron Bloch for his support in peer-editing my paper.

Allison Yates  Special thanks go to the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship at the University of California, Berkeley, including generous funding from the JSB fund, the Center for Race and Gender and Barbara Barnes, my SURF mentor Cori Hayden, everyone at SURF—particularly Timothy Rodriguez and Leah Carroll, The New York Academy of Sciences, and finally, thanks are owed to the genus lactobacillus, for animate merits that far exceed and transgress the title of “good bacteria.”
Special thanks to the following parties for their respective invaluable contributions to this issue:

**Leah Carroll** for her sponsorship of the SURF programs as the Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research.

**Mary Crabb** for the sponsorship of the BUJ Winter Issue as the BUJ's Staff Advisor.

**Timothy Rodríguez** for his individualized assistance to SURFers as the SURF ’13 Social Science and Humanities mentor.

**The SURF Internal Editorial Board**—including BUJ-SURF Coordinator Pablo Seward, and editors Suzanne Ubick, Kamyar Jarahzadeh, Tiffany Ku, Hai Hoang, Tiffany Ku, Wendy Hernandez, and Nikolay Nichiporuk—for their editorial work with SURF papers before submission to the BUJ.