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Relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help

Abstract: *This study examined the relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking. This study involved 120 university students from a university. Gender Role Conflict Scale was used to measure gender role conflict and Attitude towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form was used to measure attitude towards psychological help-seeking. The results found there is a significant negative relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards seeking psychological help. The results suggest that it is essential for mental health professionals to recognise the impact of gender roles on the counselling process.*

Keywords: *gender role conflict, attitude towards psychological help-seeking, gender difference, ethnic difference*

Both men and women faced a great deal of confusion and conflict when the feminist movement started in the 1970s. Traditional masculine characteristics such like independence, ambitious and avoid being feminine were still expected to be upheld by men (O’Neil, 1981a) and yet also expected to be accepting of the changes to female roles in society and differences between people (Levant 1996). Behavioural patterns including psychological distress, lack of self-esteem and difficulty in being intimate could be caused by this gender role conflict faced by men (O’Neil, 1981b).

It has also been observed that men tend to have negative attitude towards seeking professional psychological help as the very idea of therapy seems to be against standards conceived by society for men where most men are taught to be powerful, independent, always in control of solving their problems and to be emotionally restrictive (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; O’Neil, 2008). If a man were to seek help, it could be a threat to his sense of masculinity and might make him feel dependent to the therapist, and to feel as if that he loses control of the situation (Danforth, 2016).

The study in the field of mental health has consistently highlighted that men seek help for psychological issues way less than women across the life span (McKelley & Rochlen, 2007). Even when both genders are equally distressed, men are more likely to have greater negative attitude towards and less willing to seek counselling (Gonzalez, Alegria, &

Prihoda, 2005). It creates a “service gap” between those who are most in need of treatment and those who are willing to seek professional help (Nam, Choi, Lee, Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2013). Males who conform to strict gender norms face greater barriers in seeking the help they need and more likely to experience gender role conflict (Schaub & Williams, 2007). When they refuse to seek help, it could lead to more psychological concerns such as depression and substance abuse (Blazina & Watkins, 1996).

Only about one-third of people in therapy in the United States of America are men, with only 60% of depressed men go for treatment, only 5% of men make use of outpatient mental health services, and only 9% of men use prescription medication to improve their mental health (Springer & Mouzan, 2011). According to Befrienders Kuala Lumpur Malaysia, 63% of callers who are suicidal were compromised by the woman with only 35% of men seeking help. Self-destructiveness, hopelessness and suicide have been related to gender role conflict with suicidal men reporting a significant higher gender role conflict than non-suicidal men (Pillay, 2017).

Lynch, Long and Moorhead (2018) identified seven barriers that keep young men away from seeking psychological help which are: (1) acceptance from peers (negative reaction; a sign of weakness and ridiculed), (2) personal challenges (inability to communicate feelings, symptom recognition), (3) cultural and environmental influences (influence of religions and prayers, families

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reserved communication), (4) self-medicating with alcohol (ineffective coping mechanisms), (5) perspectives around seeking professional help (negative opinions about mental health professionals), (6) fear of homophobic responses (fear of having to disclose sexuality, stigma), and (7) traditional masculine ideals (ideas of self-reliance and strength, “tough guy” image). Four solutions were suggested to increase the prevalence of male seeking help which are: (1) tailored mental health advertising (direct, positive, and solution-focused advertising that is relevant and represents diversity), (2) integrating mental health (normalization of professional help-seeking, beginning in early childhood), education through semiformal support service (supportive informal environment, more comfortable), (3) accessible mental health care (reach out and support with information to encourage), and (4) making new meaning (reframe stigmatizing language) (Lynch et al., 2018).

Individuals with less gender role conflict have better psychological well-being. Specifically, individuals with lower restricted emotionality; success, power and competition; and conflict between work and family relations are expected to have better autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Hajloo & Moghaddasi, 2014).

There were no conclusive findings on the relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking (Boisjolie, 2013; Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011). Men who adopt dominant masculine beliefs have a less favourable attitude towards psychological help-seeking, mediated by self-stigmatisation (Vogel et al., 2011). They perceive that seeking help is a failure to the standards of masculinity. However, Boisjolie (2013) found that the total score for the Gender Role Conflict Scale and its four subscales were not significantly related attitude towards psychological help-seeking for men. Therefore, this study aimed to verify the relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking at a university in Malaysia.

Method

Participants

A total of 120 samples consisting of 60 males and 60 females was selected in this study using a purposive sampling method. An equal number of respondents from both Malay and Indian was recruited to compare the ethnic difference for gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking. The age of respondents ranged from 17 to 31 years old ($M = 21.61$, $SD = 2.36$).

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

| Characteristics | Malay | Indian | Total |
|-----------------|-------|--------|-------|
| Male | 30 | 30 | 60 |
| Female | 30 | 30 | 60 |
| Total | 60 | 60 | 120 |

Instrument

Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS) created by O’Neil, Helms, Gable, Davide, and Wrightsman (1986) was used to measure gender role conflict for men. This instrument consists of 37 items that have four subscales; Success, Power, and Competition (SPC, 13 items); Restricted Emotionality (RE, 10 items); Restricted Affectionate Behaviour (RAB, 8 items); and Conflict Between Work and Family Relationship (CBWFR, 6 items). Responses were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. In an attempt to make the questionnaire more relevant to female respondents, 11 items were altered by replacing the word “men” with “women” (Items 2, 5, 6, 12, 22, 27, 28, 30, 32, 36, and 37). In this study, the internal consistency of the Gender Role Conflict Scale is high, as the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the total scale reported .918, while the subscales range from .792 to .849 (Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability of the Instruments

| Scale | Cronbach’s alpha |
|--|------------------|
| Gender Role Conflict Scale | .918 |
| Success, power, competition | .849 |
| Restrictive emotionality, | .820 |
| Restrictive affectionate behavior | .792 |
| Conflict between work and family relations | .821 |
| Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychology Help Scale – Short Form | .704 |

The Attitude towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale-Short Form created by Fischer and Farina (1995) intended to measure an individual’s attitude towards seeking professional help for psychological problems. It consists of ten items. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale from one indicating “disagree” to four indicating “agree” to keep the consistency of the responding format in this study. The fourth item of ATSPPH-SF was removed from the analysis as the reliability was reported higher at .704 after deleted the fourth item. Hence, the total score computation was calculated by summing up the remaining nine items, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude towards seeking counselling.

Procedure

Firstly, a short inform consent of explanation was attached with the questionnaire used for participants to understand the present study. For those who agreed with the terms and instructions and fit the criterion of sampling, they were asked to complete the questionnaire, and any doubts can be cleared by asking for detail. All of the questionnaires were given to respondents and collected personally by the first author. The data collection activity was conducted around the university campus.

Results

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the variables for central of tendency, the measure of variability, and the shapes of distribution (Table 3). The gender role conflict of the respondents is slightly high with the mean score of 135.66 ($SD = 28.10$) being slightly above the midpoint score of 130. The attitude towards seeking professional psychological of the respondents is slightly positive among respondents with a mean score of 26.65 ($SD = 4.79$) being slightly above the midpoint score of 25. The cut-off of normality was set at skewness ± 2 and kurtosis ± 7 . As the variables are of close to normal distribution, with skewness ranging between $-.381$ and $.188$ while kurtosis ranging between $-.663$ and $.281$.

The Independent samples t-test was used to test the mean difference in gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking by gender and ethnic (Table 4). There is no gender different in gender role conflict ($M_{male} = 139.78$, $M_{female} = 131.53$, $t = 1.619$, $p > .05$) and attitude towards psychological help-seeking ($M_{male} = 24.27$, $M_{female} = 24.95$, $t = -.792$, $p > .05$). There is no ethnic different in gender role conflict ($M_{Malay} = 138.50$, $M_{Indian} = 132.81$, $t = 1.109$, $p > .05$) but significantly different in attitude towards psychological help-seeking ($M_{Malay} = 25.47$, $M_{Indian} = 23.75$, $t = 2.019$, $p < .05$).

Pearson's correlation was employed to test the relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking (Table 5). The data was split according to the ethnic group for this correlation

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Gender Role Conflict and Attitude towards Psychological Help-seeking

| Variable | Mean | SD | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|---|--------|-------|----------|----------|
| Gender role conflict | 135.66 | 28.10 | -.241 | .034 |
| Success, power, competition | 51.35 | 11.16 | -.381 | .180 |
| Restrictive emotionality, | 36.42 | 9.28 | -.116 | .281 |
| Restrictive affectionate behavior | 23.33 | 7.81 | .188 | -.128 |
| Conflict between work and family relations | 20.80 | 6.50 | -.219 | -.460 |
| Attitude towards psychological help-seeking | 26.65 | 4.79 | -.108 | -.663 |

Table 4. Mean Difference in Gender Role Conflict and Attitude toward Psychological Help-seeking by Gender and Ethnic

| Variable | n | Mean | SD | t-value | df | sig-t |
|---|----|--------|-------|---------|--------|-------|
| Gender role conflict | | | | 1.619 | 118.00 | .108 |
| Male | 60 | 139.78 | 25.94 | | | |
| Female | 60 | 131.53 | 29.76 | | | |
| Attitude towards psychological help-seeking | | | | -.792 | 118.00 | .430 |
| Male | 60 | 24.27 | 4.80 | | | |
| Female | 60 | 24.95 | 4.65 | | | |
| Gender role conflict | | | | 1.109 | 106.77 | .270 |
| Malay | 60 | 138.50 | 23.08 | | | |
| Indian | 60 | 132.81 | 32.31 | | | |
| Attitude towards psychological help-seeking | | | | 2.019* | 118.00 | .046 |
| Malay | 60 | 25.47 | 4.31 | | | |
| Indian | 60 | 23.75 | 4.98 | | | |

Table 5. Correlation between Gender Role Conflict and Attitude towards Psychological Help-seeking

| Variable | Attitude towards Psychological Help-seeking | |
|---|---|---------|
| | Malay | Indian |
| Gender role conflict | -.103 | -.365** |
| Success, power, and competition | -.049 | -.474** |
| Restrictive emotionality | .092 | -.196 |
| Restrictive affectionate behavior | -.345** | -.273* |
| Conflict between work and family relationship | -.067 | -.124 |

Note. * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed);

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed).

analysis as there is an ethnic difference for the attitude towards psychological help-seeking. The total score of the gender role conflict is significantly related to attitude towards psychological help-seeking in a negative direction, only for the Indian sample ($r = -.365$). The further analysis reported that success, power, and competition subscale and restrictive affectionate behaviour subscale are also significantly related to attitude towards psychological help-seeking. Success, power, and competition are negatively related to attitude towards psychological help-seeking for the Indian samples only ($r = -.474$, $p < .01$). As an Indian respondent pays more attention to being successful as part of his/her gender identity, he is more likely to have a negative attitude towards psychological help-seeking. Meanwhile for restrictive affectionate behaviour is negatively related to attitude towards psychological help-seeking for both Malay ($r = .345$, $p < .01$) and Indian samples ($r = -.273$, $p < .05$). It indicates as a respondent have trouble in expressing affection to those of the same gender in terms of emotion as part of gender constraints, he/she may have a more negative attitude towards psychological help-seeking. The percentage of shared variance for the Malay samples ($R^2 = 11.90\%$) is higher than the Indian samples ($R^2 = 7.45\%$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking. Results reported that there is a significant relationship between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking ($r = -.365$, $p < .01$). The result is consistent with Berger, Levant, McMillian, Kelleher, and Sellers (2005) stated that gender role conflict had been related to lower help-seeking despite higher psychological stress. Other researchers have also found that men higher in gender role conflict reported negative attitude towards using counselling services (Blazina & Watkins, 1996) and have a higher risk for underutilising counselling (Good & Wood, 1995). A further comparison found that respondents who rejected the idea of attending counselling scores a higher mean score of gender role conflict ($t = 4.43$, $p < .001$) and more negative attitude towards psychological help-seeking ($t = 5.72$, $p < .001$) as compared to those who accepted the idea of attending counselling. The Success, Power and Competition subscale and Restricted Affectionate Behaviour subscale were also significantly related to seeking psychological help. Being constrained by traditional gender role, respondents show a sense of hesitation to open up emotionally to another individual due to the pre-existing societal norm that problems should be dealt by oneself and to seek help would contradict the idea of "machoism" in a sense for the male population (O'Neil, 2008). Another reason in line with the influence of gender role conflict is irrational thought that seeking help would cause one to be weak as the power would be given to a counsellor or therapist (Danforth, 2016). It could explain the significant negative correlation

between success, power and competition subscale and seeking help.

There are some critical implications of the findings from this study. This finding of significance between gender role conflict and attitude towards psychological help-seeking could be used to not only add to the field of research on gender role but to help the general public to be aware of the impact of toxic "masculinity" conformity for both male and female, and how it relates with help-seeking. It is essential for mental health professionals to recognise the impact of gender roles on the counselling process as men are more likely to underutilised professional psychological help (Good & Wood, 1995). Factors such as masculinity ideologies, social norms, and gender roles could be the barriers in discouraging men's willing to seek help. This study could serve as another line of data in the effort of improving counselling sessions for multicultural competencies. Men and their gender role conflict should be recognised as part of multicultural competency with the inclusion of traditional masculine gender role could be in favour of understanding male clients (Liu, 2005). Men undergo socialisation where society pushes them into a set of strict roles and behaviour with the possibility of dire consequences in the same way for female or minorities (Liu, 2005). Multicultural competent therapy could be the key to encourage men to seek therapy more often (Liu, 2005).

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