

Research Paper

Gender-Role Identification, Emotional Expressivity and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Middle Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

Middle Adulthood is a period of ever-increasing physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes as well as life transitions like menopause and empty nest syndrome. Middle adults are entrusted with the responsibility of children as well as elderly parents. The role struggles and life transitions can add to their distress and can take a toll on their mental health. Gender-role identification and emotional expressivity are two variables which can have an impact on professional help seeking attitudes of middle adults. The present study explored the relationship between gender-role identification, emotional expressivity and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help in the urban Indian middle adult population. A sample of 183 people (90 females and 93 males) between the ages of 36-60 years were asked to fill the following questionnaires: Indian Gender Role Identity Scale (IGRIS), Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire (BEQ) and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help- Short Form (ATSPPH-SF). Results showed that 1. gender role identification and help-seeking attitude are negatively correlated in men, and that 2. men with high gender-role identification show less emotional expressivity and poor help-seeking attitude than women with high gender-role identification. The implications of the same are discussed further.

Keywords: *Middle Adults, Gender-Role Identification, Masculinity, Femininity, Emotional Expressivity, Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help*

Middle Adulthood is a stage of life which is characterized by a multitude of physical, emotional, cognitive and social changes. The constant juggling between roles as well as age-related physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes can have a significant impact on their mental health. Women are twice as likely to develop clinically significant depressive symptoms during the perimenopause period (Cohen et al, 2006).

Another change that comes in middle adulthood is the empty nest syndrome which brings in feelings of loneliness, isolation, sadness and loss of identity among parents. These life-events can have an impact on their mental health. Seeking professional psychological help can help people address and deal with their emotional concerns. However, there is a huge

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gap when it comes to seeking professional help. Gender is one of the many social barriers, which deters people from seeking help. Internalised societal expectations from men prevent them from being emotionally expressive and act further as a deterrent towards seeking professional help.

Gender role identification (GRI) refers to the extent to which an individual identifies with the traditional, socially constructed gender role. Gender role refers to a set of behaviours, personality traits, and views about what is deemed masculine or feminine in society or in any culture (Alters et al, 2013).

Emotional Expressivity refers to the extent to which one engages in emotional expression-communication of an affective state through verbal and/or non-verbal gestures. The verbal aspect of emotional expression involves talking about the emotional state one is in whereas the non-verbal aspect of emotional expression involves various facial, postural and/or behavioural gestures such as smiling, frowning, sighing, crying, etc.

Attitude towards seeking professional psychological help refers to peoples' tendency towards seeking help from mental health professionals, such as psychiatrists, psychologists and counsellors when one encounters problems with emotional, intrapersonal or interpersonal functioning or in order to improve one's psychological well-being.

Rationale of the Study

According to a survey by the World Health Organization, 1 in 5 Indians (around 200 million people) suffer from depression in their lifetime, however only 10- 12% of people with depression seek professional psychological help. (Doraiswamy & Chandy, 2018).

Quarantining and lockdown added to the mental health issues of individuals with people under quarantine experiencing symptoms related to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Brooks et al., 2020). Mental health of an individual is not only shaped by their personal factors, it is also shaped by social conditioning around them. When it comes to gender, social norms influence the way one expresses their emotions. However, gender socialisation alone cannot explain how people belonging to the same gender group exhibit differences in emotional expressivity. If gender alone cannot account for within group differences among people of the same gender, is there an internalised thought process which influences one's emotional expressivity and attitude towards seeking professional help? It becomes important to study this underlying thought process and whether or not it predicts emotional expressivity and professional psychological help-seeking behaviour in men as well as in women.

Objectives

1. To assess level of gender role identification in middle adults
2. To assess level of emotional expressivity in middle adults
3. To assess attitude towards seeking professional psychological help in middle adults
4. To find out whether or not there is a relation between gender-role identification, emotional expressivity and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help across males and females in the middle adulthood stage

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Hypotheses

1. There is a negative relation between gender-role identification and emotional expressivity in men.
2. There is a negative relation between gender-role identification and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help in men.
3. Men with higher gender-role identification have less emotional expressivity than women with higher gender-role identification.
4. Men with higher gender-role identification have a higher negative attitude towards seeking professional psychological help than women with higher gender-role identification.

Variables

- Gender-role Identification
- Emotional Expressivity
- Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help

Sample

The sample consisted of 90 female and 93 male participants between the ages of 36-60 years.

Brief Description of Tools

1. **Indian Gender Role Identity Scale (IGRIS):** The IGRIS was developed by Jayanti Basu from Calcutta University in 2010 and can be used to assess Gender Role Identification among the Indian Population. This scale consists of 30 adjectives which are to be rated on a 7-point Likert Scale based on the degree of self-description of the item. It consists of two Subscales- masculinity and femininity. Cronbach's alpha for IGRIS was .89 and .79, for the masculinity and femininity scale, respectively. Higher scores indicate higher degree of gender-role identification for the mentioned subscale, whereas lower scores indicate lower degree of gender-role identification for the mentioned subscale.
2. **Berkeley's Expressivity Questionnaire (BEQ):** The BEQ was developed by J.J. Gross and O.P. John in 1997. The BEQ is a 16-item scale assessing level of emotional expressivity and it consists of the following subscales: Positive expressivity, negative expressivity, impulse control. Items are to be rated on a 7-point Likert Scale based on the degree of self- description of the item. Higher scores indicate high emotional expressivity whereas lower scores indicate low emotional expressivity.
3. **Attitude towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale Short Form (ATSPPH-SF):** The ATSPPH-SF is a 10-item scale developed by Fisher and Farina in 1995. This scale assesses peoples' attitude towards seeking help from therapists or counsellors for their mental health concerns. Items are to be rated on a 4-point Likert Scale (from 0-3) based on the level of agreement with each statement. Higher scores indicate a positive help-seeking attitude, whereas lower scores indicate poor help-seeking attitude.

Procedure

A Google form was sent to the participants which consisted of the three scales in the following order- 1. Indian Gender-Role Identity Scale (IGRIS) 2. Berkeley's Expressivity Questionnaire (BEQ) 3. Attitude towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale

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Short Form (ATSPPH-SF). After the responses were collected, scoring for each of the scales was done using Excel. For IGRIS, Masculinity and Femininity Scores were computed separately. Masculinity Scores were considered for male participants and Femininity Scores were considered for female participants. Since there were no clear guidelines on the threshold for high and low scores for IGRIS, median was calculated for the total scores of IGRIS. Participants who scored below the median value (for their gender- consistent subscale) were considered to have low Gender-Role Identification whereas those who scored above the median value were considered to have higher Gender-Role Identification.

For the mentioned variables in the study- Gender Role Identification, Emotional Expressivity and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help, Descriptive Statistics like Mean and SD were used. Normality of data was assessed using the Shapiro Wilk Test which was done to analyse the distribution of variables- whether they are normally distributed or not. Since gender-role identification was not normally distributed, non-parametric tests had to be used. Spearman's rho was done to assess the relationship between: 1) Gender Role Identification and Emotional Expressivity 2) Gender Role Identification and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help and 3) Emotional Expressivity and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help. Mann-Whitney test to assess if there are any significant differences in 1) Emotional Expressivity and 2) Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help in men and women with High GRI.

Table No. 1 Relationship between Gender Role Identification and Emotional Expressivity in Men

N	Sig. (2-tailed)	Correlation coefficient
93	0.671	0.45

Table 1 shows the relationship between Gender Role Identification and Emotional Expressivity in men (N= 93). A Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between Gender Role Identification and Emotional Expressivity. There was a positive correlation between the two variables wherein $r = 0.45$ at 0.05 level (2-tailed), which is not in line with the proposed hypothesis.

Table No. 2: Relationship Between Gender-Role Identification and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Men

N	Sig. (2-tailed)	Correlation coefficient
93	0.29	- 0.227*

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

Table 2 shows the relationship between Gender Role Identification and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Men (N= 93). A Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between Gender Role Identification and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Men. There was a weak but significant negative correlation between Gender Role Identification and Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help in Men, wherein $r = -0.227$ and $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed), which is in line with the proposed hypothesis.

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Table No. 3: Emotional Expressivity of Men and Women with High Gender Role Identification

Men	N	Mean	SD	Sig.
	83	82.48	12.268	0.000
Women	N	Mean	SD	
	75	74.28	15.022	

Table 3 shows the mean scores of emotional expressivity of men and women with high gender-role identification. There are 83 females and 75 males who have high gender identification. For females, the mean score for emotional expressivity is 82.48 and SD is 12.628. For males, the mean score for emotional expressivity is 74.28 and SD is 74.28.

According to the Mann Whitney Test, the significance level is $p=0.000$, which is less than 0.05 ($p<0.05$). The mean score of females (82.48) is higher than that of males (74.28), indicating that men with high gender-role identification have less emotional expressivity than women with high gender-role identification, which is in line with the proposed hypothesis.

Table No. 4: Attitude Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help of Men and Women with High Gender Role Identification

Men	N	Mean	SD	Sig.
	83	17.40	5.655	0.006
Women	N	Mean	SD	
	75	15.38	5.344	

Table 4 shows the mean scores of attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help of men and women with high gender-role identification. For females, the mean score for attitude towards seeking professional psychological help is 17.40 and SD is 5.655. For males, the mean score for attitude towards seeking professional psychological help is 15.38 and SD is 5.344.

According to the Mann Whitney Test, the significance level is $p=0.006$, which is less than 0.05 ($p<0.05$). The mean score of females (17.40) is higher than that of males (15.38), indicating that men with high gender-role identification have a higher negative attitude towards seeking professional psychological help than women with high gender-role identification, which is in line with the proposed hypothesis.

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between gender-role identification, emotional expressivity and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help in the urban middle adult population. A sample of 183 people (90 females and 93 males) between the ages of 36-60 years was considered for the study. Normality testing was done for the variables using Shapiro-Wilk test and it was found that one of the three variables was not normally distributed, so non-parametric tests- Spearman's rho and Mann Whitney were done to test the hypotheses.

The first hypothesis which states that "there is a negative relation between gender-role identification and emotional expressivity in men" has been rejected. There is a positive but insignificant correlation between gender-role identification and emotional expressivity. This

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is in contradiction with the research trend which has shown a negative correlation between the two variables in men. It could be because gender-role identification alone is not sufficient enough to explain how emotions are expressed by men. One explanation behind the positive correlation as pointed in a meta-analytical review by Trzesniewski et al., 2009 is that men are more likely to express emotions like anger and frustration which are consistent with the traditional masculine gender role rather than emotions like sadness or fear which involve more vulnerability. Personality traits too can contribute to expression of emotions. In a study it was found that individuals high on Neuroticism trait expressed more negative emotions of anger and sadness than those low on this trait. (Gross & John, 1997).

The second hypothesis which states that “There is a negative relation between gender-role identification and attitude towards seeking professional psychological help in men” has been accepted. Seeking professional help for mental health issues is considered to be a sign of weakness in India and the effect of this is magnified even more in men, especially in men adhering to the traditional ‘tough and strong’ gender-typical role. The factors associated with seeking professional help for mental health concerns- admitting that there is an emotional problem and relying on someone are in contradiction with the traditional masculine role of being tough, self-reliant and having emotional control. (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

The third hypothesis which states that “Men with higher gender-role identification have less emotional expressivity than women with higher gender-role identification” is accepted. This is in line with the existing research trend which says that women are more emotionally expressive than men. However, internalised ideas of traditional gender roles play an important role in influencing how men and women express their emotions. Societal notions of masculinity encourage men to not express their emotions and to be rational as well as level-headed in all situations. Emotional expression thus becomes a deviation from their gender-typical role of being stoic and emotionally restrained, discouraging men from expressing vulnerabilities and emotional sensitivity.

The fourth hypothesis which states that “Men with higher gender-role identification have a higher negative attitude towards seeking professional psychological help than women with higher gender-role identification” is accepted. Societal norms around femininity entail that women are seen as more relational and dependent as compared to men, whereas masculinity emphasises on independence and stoicism. Individuals who have internalised traditional masculinity often equate seeking professional psychological help as a sign of weakness, believing that they should be able to deal with their own issues. This belief acts as a deterrent for them to seek professional help. Traditional masculine gender norms is also associated with a fear of femininity, wherein individuals who endorse traditional masculine gender norms experience discomfort and anxiety about engaging in emotional expression and disclosure due to a fear of being perceived as feminine, and by implication, “less manly” (Courtenay, 2000).

The findings reflect the need to adopt a more gender-sensitive approach to mental healthcare and therapeutic practices in India. Therapeutic models that empower and encourage men to seek help can be incorporated in our practice. CBT, SFBT and Brief Therapies can be used initially with men who find it difficult to express their emotions. That being said, the goal is not to reinforce the lack of emotional expressivity and harmful traditional masculine norms, but to help men look at the therapeutic process in a less intimidating manner.

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Besides this, development and internalisation of a flexible idea of masculinity, which emphasises toughness along with self-compassion, self-reliance along with interdependence, strength along with empathy and vulnerability, can help in breaking the notion of emotional expressivity and help seeking as a sign of weakness. Positive interpretation of the same as a sign of strength and courage can increase the likelihood of better psychological health and healthy interpersonal relationships, too.

With the middle-adult population who have grown up being socialised in a very gendered atmosphere, it becomes difficult to help them unlearn notions about gender stereotypes, and ideas around mental toughness, toxic masculinity and seeking help. Mental health professionals and youngsters can take the role of being psychoeducators and work collaboratively along with the middle adult population to create an open space for conversations around mental health, therapy and destigmatization around the idea of seeking help when required.

Limitations of the study

The study was conducted by circulating Google Forms, providing little or no scope to clarify doubts about the items in the study. The responses could have been interpreted seeking differently than the way it was intended to be, which could have contributed to some errors in response. Social desirability when it came to answering questions, particularly related to help seeking attitudes could have influenced the participants' responses as well. One of the questionnaires was long and time consuming, which could have contributed to fatigue effect in the participants. Lastly, the sample filtered out for high gender role identification from the total sample was a bit skewed as there the number of females (n=83) than the number of males (n=75).

Directions for Future Research

Using the same variables, one can look for within and between men and women with high and low gender differences between men gender role identification to assess the impact that it has on emotional expressivity and help seeking attitudes. It can help in understanding whether it is the gender or internalisation of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' which is a major concern. The study can also be conducted using regression analysis to go beyond correlation and assess the causal factors surrounding the studied variables. One can also expand the scope of the study to the entirety of the gender variables among the diverse population and explore the relationship between them.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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