



Research paper

The mediation roles of discrepancy stress and self-esteem between masculine role discrepancy and mental health problems



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Masculine role discrepancy and discrepancy stress occur when men perceive that they fail to live up to the ideal manhood derived from societal prescriptions. The present study examined the associations between masculine role discrepancy and two emotional and mental health problems (social anxiety and depressive symptoms), and potential mediation effects through discrepancy stress and self-esteem in a male general population.

Methods: Based on random population-based sampling, 2000 male residents in Hong Kong were interviewed. Levels of masculine role discrepancy, discrepancy stress, self-esteem, social anxiety, and depressive symptoms were assessed by using validated scales.

Results: Results of structural equation modeling analysis indicated that the proposed model fit the sample well. ($\chi^2(118) = 832.34, p < .05, CFI = 0.94, NNFI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.06$). Those who were young, single and less educated were vulnerable to masculine role discrepancy, discrepancy stress, and emotional/mental health problems. We found that discrepancy stress significantly mediated the association between masculine role discrepancy and social anxiety, while self-esteem significantly mediated the associations between masculine role discrepancy and both social anxiety and depression.

Limitations: Study limitations mainly included the cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported questionnaires.

Conclusions: The associations between masculine discrepancy and social anxiety/depressive symptoms among men may be explained by the increase in discrepancy stress and decrease in self-esteem. The findings suggest needs and directions for future research for the relationship between masculine role discrepancy and men's mental health, mechanisms involved, and interventions for improvement.

1. Introduction

Males are being socialized to exhibit masculine behaviors and traits; examples include those related to domination over others, independence, homophobia, and emotional restriction that can be observed in many traditional cultures (Mahalik et al., 2003; Yeung et al., 2016). Masculine role discrepancy occurs when males perceive that they do not live up to the ideal manhood that is aligned with societal prescriptions, i.e., they perceived themselves being less masculine than the typical 'man' (Reidy et al., 2014, 2016). Violation against masculine norms or expectations may lead to negative social feedbacks and punishments (Pleck, 1995; Zeman and Garber, 1996), as well as negative personal consequences, such as distress and anxiety (Berke et al., 2017). To our knowledge, only one study has investigated the associations

between masculine role discrepancy and males' emotional and mental health problems (Reidy et al., 2017), although other studies tested the associations between constructs related to gender nonconformity and psychological well-being among males (e.g., Rieger and Savin-Williams, 2012). This study investigated the relationships between masculine role discrepancy and emotional/mental health problems and potential underlying mechanisms.

Discrepancy stress may arise when males perceive themselves to be insufficiently masculine, i.e., when perceived masculine role discrepancy exists (Pleck, 1981, 1995; Reidy et al., 2014). It is likely to occur when masculine role norms are salient to males' sense of self (Alfred et al., 2014; Reidy et al., 2014, 2016). Reidy et al. (2014, 2017) reported a strong correlation between masculine role discrepancy and discrepancy stress.

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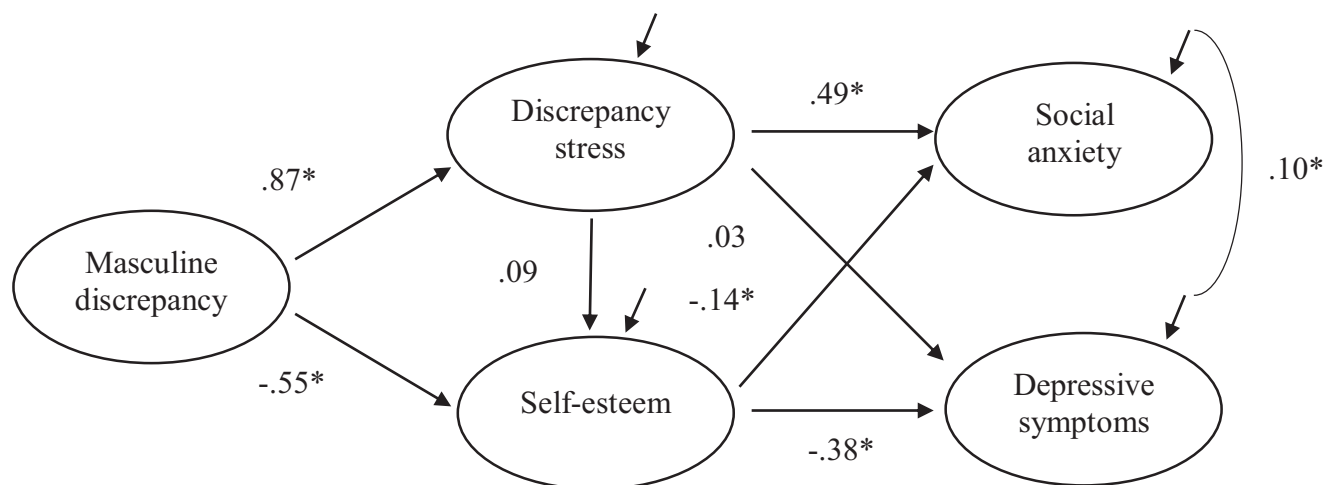


Fig. 1. The proposed model with standardized coefficients. *Note.* * $p < .05$. For simplicity reasons, the demographic variables controlled in the model are not presented in the figure. Age was significantly associated with discrepancy stress ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < .01$) and social anxiety ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < .001$). Education was significantly associated with self-esteem ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .001$).

Discrepancy stress may in turn induce mental health problems among males. The contention is supported by the common and consistent reports of the positive associations between stress and mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety (Hammen, 2005; Stroud et al., 2008). Well-established associations between gender role conflict and mental health problems also support this hypothesis indirectly (Eisler et al., 1988; Friedman, 2013; Good and Mintz, 1990; Liu et al., 2005; Vandello and Bosson, 2013). While discrepancy stress focuses on the worry and strain caused by the feeling of being perceived as less masculine than the typical man (Reidy et al., 2014), gender role conflict focuses on the degree of discomfort or conflict when facing specific situations that involve potential gender-role conflicts (e.g., restrictive emotionality, success, power, competition, restrictive affectionate behavior between men, and conflict between work and family relationships) (O'Neil, 1981; Wester, 2008). The two constructs are hence different but inter-related. Furthermore, as discrepancy stress is potentially associated with both masculine role discrepancy and mental health problems, it is a potential mediator of the associations between masculine role discrepancy and emotional/mental health problems. To our knowledge, only one study has investigated that association, and found that masculine role discrepancy was positively associated with discrepancy stress, which in turn was positively associated with psychosocial maladjustments such as mood disorder symptoms (Reidy et al., 2017).

In general, perceived actual versus ideal self discrepancies increase negative self-feelings and emotional problems (Brechan and Kvaalem, 2015; Crocker and Knight, 2005; Higgins, 1987; Higgins et al., 1985). Pleck (1981, 1995) suggested that gender role discrepancy and related stress can diminish self-esteem among men who conform with traditional and hegemonic constructions of masculinity. Some empirical studies also revealed that perceived conflict due to the confines of masculine role norms and perceived need to avoid femininity were negatively associated with men's self-esteem (e.g., Schwartz et al., 2005; Sharpe and Heppner, 1991; Whitley, 1983). However, mixed findings have been reported in previous studies. For instance, Rummell and Levant (2014) used standardized scores of the difference between ideal and actual masculine norms to measure gender role discrepancy, and found that it was not significantly associated with self-esteem. The present study aimed to add empirical evidence to the relationship between masculine role discrepancy and self-esteem. Furthermore, the vulnerability model (Brechan and Kvaalem, 2015; Orth and Robins, 2013; Sowislo and Orth, 2013) has suggested that low self-esteem is a major cause of anxiety and depression. We hypothesized that masculine role discrepancy would be negatively associated with

self-esteem, which in turn would be associated with social anxiety and depression.

Hong Kong is a unique place where 'East meets West'. From a traditional Chinese perspective, "men are for the exterior while women are for the interior", and men should be tough, less emotional, and powerful (Rochelle and Yim, 2015). Among Chinese, male and female behaviors have been governed by the Confucian beliefs that emphasize importance of individuals acting in accordance with social expectations regarding their roles and positions (Bond, 2010; Leung and Chan, 2012). Conformity to gender role norms is important in preserving order and position in society so as to achieve social harmony and peace. In general, Chinese men endorse traditional masculinity ideology to a greater extent than men of other cultures (e.g., American men) (Levant et al., 1996; Wu et al., 2001). However, Western beliefs may have a substantial impact on Hong Kong males' perceptions on gender role norms and their levels of perceived masculine role discrepancy. A study conducted among Hong Kong Chinese males found that the levels of endorsed masculinity norms (e.g., power over women, primacy of work, endorsement of norms of heterosexual self-presentation, and emotional control) differed from those reported in Western samples (Rochelle and Yim, 2015). Another study showed that conformity with masculine gender norms was a key concern that affected Hong Kong Chinese men's well-being (Yeung et al., 2016). A recent psychiatric epidemiological study based on a representative general Hong Kong population sample estimated that around 10% of men in Hong Kong suffered from some common mental disorders, including anxiety and depression (Lam et al., 2015). Thus, it is important to understand the association between masculine role discrepancy and males' mental health, and the roles of discrepancy stress and self-esteem as potential mediators of such associations within the mixed and evolving cultural context. Such knowledge would provide useful insights for mental health promotion in male general populations.

We firstly investigated the levels of two mental health problems (i.e., social anxiety and depressive symptoms) in the male general population in Hong Kong, and their associations with masculine role discrepancy. We further investigated the roles of self-esteem and discrepancy stress as mediators of such associations by fitting a structural equation model (SEM), which is shown in Fig. 1. In addition, we tested the associations between socio-demographics (e.g., age, marriage status, and education levels) and the key independent variables (i.e., masculine role discrepancy, discrepancy stress, and self-esteem) and dependent variables (social anxiety, and depressive symptoms). Specifically, we hypothesized that (1) perceived masculine role discrepancy would be positively associated with discrepancy stress, and negatively

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