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Masculine gender role stress and violence: A literature review and future directions

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ABSTRACT

Masculine gender role stress (MGRS) has been linked to violence against women and gay men, although the current literature isolates these groups. Synthesizing literature about violence and MGRS, this review demonstrates how MGRS is used to control people perceived by the perpetrator as feminine. This critique may be useful to professionals implementing anti-violence interventions or working with males struggling with gender role stress. We included peer-reviewed articles (n = 20) that measured MGRS, were conducted in the U.S., and sampled males. MGRS was related to past aggression towards women and gay men. The literature about violence against women showed that high-MGRS males were more likely than low-MGRS males to endorse intimate partner violence when their masculinity was threatened, endorse anti-femininity norms, exhibit maladaptive attachment styles, and adhere to rigid gender norms. The literature examining violence towards gay men showed that high-MGRS males were more likely than low-MGRS males to endorse anti-femininity, anger, and past violence towards gay men. A limitation is not sampling diverse males; a strength is consistent measurement. It is concluded that significant effort needs to be done in developing interventions about MGRS and violence. Future studies should sample diverse males and develop anti-violence interventions directed towards high-MGRS males.

Contents

1. Introduction

Violence against women and sexual minorities is a public health problem in the United States, related to physical and psychological consequences (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.a.). Females are more likely than males to be victims of violence with approximately 29% of women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.a). Males account for the majority of IPV perpetration (Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002).

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Men who have sex with men (MSM) are also at an increased risk of violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.b.). Half of sexual minorities report verbal abuse due to their sexual orientation (Herek, 2008). In a study reviewing hate crime records in Los Angeles, victims of hate crimes related to sexual orientation experienced more severe and damaging attacks compared to victims of non-biased crime (Dunbar, 2006).

Researchers have identified masculine gender role stress (MGRS)—defined as the experience of distress in the context of situations that an individual appraises as a threat to his masculine identity (Copenhaver, Lash, & Eisler, 2000)—as a psychological concept that explains why some males disproportionately use violence against women and gay men. Gender is a social construction of masculinity and femininity, an achieved status regulated by normative beliefs and expectations (Eisler & Blalock, 1991). Researchers have found that MGRS is a predictor of anger, aggression, and endorsement of violent behavior among college-aged heterosexual males (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011). The stress occurs when men who value rigid adherence to traditional gender roles "judge themselves unable to cope with the imperatives of the male role or when a situation is viewed as requiring 'unmanly' or feminine behavior" (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987, p.125). The CDC has stated that a rigid adherence to traditional gender roles is a known risk factor for IPV (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.a.).

Traditional gender stereotypes ascribe characteristics of dominance and power to males; submissiveness and powerlessness to females. While masculinity and femininity have been linked to positive psychological and social outcomes (Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988), some individuals expect inflexible traditional gender roles from themselves and others. This phenomenon is observed more frequently in males than females (Eisler et al., 1988) and is more often a mode of policing masculinity—both of the self and others—rather than femininity (Parrott, 2009).

This literature review is necessary because to date all studies and reviews about MGRS and violence have focused on aggression against either exclusively women (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011; Mahalik, Aldarondo, Gilbert-Gokhale, & Shore, 2005) or gay men (Parrott, 2008; Parrott, 2009; Parrott, Peterson, & Bakeman, 2011; Parrott, Peterson, Vincent, & Bakeman, 2008; Vincent, Parrott, Peterson, 2011), but never both. These isolated bodies of literature give an incomplete view of MGRS, implying that MGRS is either only experienced by heterosexual male intimate partners or homophobic males. Theoretically, a male who experiences MGRS when his masculinity is threatened by a female partner would also experience MGRS around a gay man who threatened traditional male gender roles; however, males could experience MGRS outside of those two contexts. Although gay men may or may not exhibit feminine traits, men who endorse rigid gender roles tend to perceive gay men as feminine (Parrott, 2008). By synthesizing how MGRS impacts violence against both women and gay men, we can highlight how MGRS is a means of controlling any people who are perceived by the perpetrator as feminine and policing their actions.

Since MGRS is predicated on the notion that high-MGRS males feel threatened when traditional gender roles are violated, high-MGRS men may perceive sexual minorities as threatening to their own sexuality. Prejudice against femininity is a primary determinant of aggression towards gay men (Parrott, Peterson, & Bakeman, 2011).

Hegemonic masculine gender role beliefs, such as MGRS, are theoretically rooted in three distinct norms: status, the belief that men must gain the respect of others; toughness, the belief that men are inclined to be aggressive; and anti-femininity, the belief that men should not engage in stereotypically feminine activities (Thompson & Pleck, 1986). This review will argue that anti-femininity links MGRS to violence against both women and gay men, as MGRS is used to control people perceived by the perpetrator as feminine. This argument is based on previous research suggesting a link between anti-femininity and antigay anger (Parrott, et al., 2008) as well as hostility towards women (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011). This synthesized understanding of MGRS is essential for any future intervention targeting men who experience MGRS.

The objectives of this literature review are to explore the relationship between MGRS and violence towards women, MGRS and violence towards gay men, synthesize these two bodies of literature, acknowledge the limitations and strengths of these studies, and recommend future directions and public health implications. Comparing the literature about women and gay men separately will highlight the similarity of the methods and findings. A synthesized understanding of MGRS could be useful to public health professionals implementing anti-violence interventions and to counselors working with males struggling with gender role stress.

2. Methods

This literature reviews about MGRS summarized research conducted between 1987 and 2013. The review was conducted in March 2013. The inclusion criteria included studies that were from an English-language peer-reviewed journal, conducted in the United States, included males in the sampling frame, and measured MGRS. References cited in peer-reviewed articles were observed. The search engines used were PubMed, Google Scholar, and PsycInfo, yielding 20 articles. The following search terms were used: "masculine gender role stress," "MGRS," "gender role stress," and "violence."

Since women are generally socially permitted to exhibit more flexible gender roles and thus, are not expected to experience stress when flouting traditional gender norms, this review did not include feminine gender role stress.

This review was limited to MGRS because it is well-studied, widely used, and helps explain the psychology behind rigidly-held masculine gender identity. Similar constructs, such as the theory of gender role conflict were considered, but not included because previous literature had already been reviewed (O'Neil, 2008).

2.1. Measurement

The most widely accepted method of assessing MGRS is the Masculine Gender Role Stress scale (MGRSS), developed by Eisler and Skidmore (1987). Initially a 66-item scale, the MGRSS is now used as a 40-item scale. Participants rate on a 7-item or 5-item Likert scale to what extent they find the situation in the prompt stressful. Scores can range from 0 to 200 (5-item scale) or 280 (7-item scale). Higher scores indicate higher gender role stress, typically analyzed as a continuous variable. Examples include "comforting a male friend who is upset," "admitting to your friends that you do housework," and "with a woman who is more successful than you" (Eisler et al., 1988). There is not another scale regularly used to assess MGRS.

There are five domains in the MGRSS: perceiving self as 1) physically inadequate (inability to meet masculine standards of physical fitness, sexual skill, and appearances); 2) emotionally expressive (expression of love, fear, or hurt feelings); 3) intellectually inferior (inability to meet standards of rational thought, decisiveness, and ambition); 4) performing inadequately (potential failure in work or sexual performance); or 5) subordinate to women (being outperformed by a woman) (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987). The MGRSS has a high reliability with a Cronbach's alpha (α) ranging from 0.88 to 0.94 (Moore et al., 2010).

2.2. Synthesis methodology

These studies were compared by population sample, methodology for measuring outcome, and MGRS-related outcome. All studies utilized the MGRSS. Studies researching MGRS and violence used the following methodologies for measuring outcomes: self-reported past perpetration,