

# Gender and perception of/attitudes toward psychotherapy vs. drug therapy

Theodore W. Hendrickson '24 and Jennifer E. Vitale

*Department of Psychology, Hampden-Sydney College, Hampden-Sydney, VA 23943*

## **Abstract**

This study aimed to find if there was a preference among male and females toward psychotherapy vs. drug therapy. One specifically focused variable is the effect of those with higher traditional masculine norms on the therapeutic approaches. Two questionnaires were sent to young adults willing to participate in the study. The first questionnaire was the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS), and the second was the Mental Help Seeking Scale (MHSAS). One hundred nine young adults participated in this study. The total outcome of the study provided no significant results. However, the (MHSAS) displayed some areas in which some statistical evidence could be found. The results from this portion of the study are limited; more data is needed for future evidence.

## **Introduction**

Isaac Ray, one of the founding members of the American Psychiatric Association, presented a definition of mental hygiene in 1893 as "the art of preserving the mind against all incidents and influences calculated to deteriorate its qualities, impair its energies, or derange its movements." In today's society, mental health treatments play a crucial role due to their increasing acceptance and accessibility to the general public. The field of mental health treatment has witnessed significant perception and attitude shifts over the past few decades. A diverse offering of therapeutic options to individuals grappling with psychological distress exists. Two prominent approaches, psychotherapy and drug therapy, have emerged as pillars of modern mental healthcare.

Psychotherapy has many titles, including psychoanalysis, counseling, and talk therapy, but it can be defined as treating mental health conditions through verbal communication and interaction. Psychotherapy is a modality of treatment in which the therapist and patient(s) work together to ameliorate psychopathologic conditions and functional impairment through a focus on the therapeutic relationship; the patient's attitudes, thoughts, and behavior; and social context and development.

Psychotherapy is performed with a licensed mental health professional in a one-on-one session or with other patients in a group setting.

Drug therapy, also known as pharmacotherapy, is the administration of drugs to treat or prevent disease. Pharmacotherapy is any treatment utilizing pharmaceutical drugs, e.g., antidepressants (Kamenov et al., 2016). Specifically, for this study, the focus will be on the use of antidepressants. A doctor prescribes many antidepressants, but some medications can only be prescribed by a psychiatrist. However, despite their efficacy and widespread availability, substantial variation exists in individuals' preferences toward these treatment modalities. A critical yet inconclusive dimension shaping these preferences is gender. This study aimed to analyze the relevance of gender and the seeking of psychological and mental health treatments for young adult individuals.

Due to the increased availability of social media, media in general, and mental health treatment to a broader audience, the perception of a gender difference in self-help treatment has become a stereotype when it is a factual observation. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 43.8 million adults experience mental illness annually. Of that number, women are twice as likely to seek any mental health treatments than men. This raises the question of why? One of the most straightforward answers is societal expectations and cultural conditioning. Traditional gender norms often discourage men from expressing vulnerability or seeking help for emotional struggles. There is a societal expectation for men to be strong, self-reliant, and stoic, which can create a barrier to seeking mental health support. Moreover, internally, men cope with mental health difficulties differently compared to women, demonstrating an increased tendency to self-medicate with alcohol and drugs to alleviate emotional distress (Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Möller-Leimkühler, 2002; Oliver et al., 2005; Rutz & Rihmer, 2009). Men generally do not like to talk about their feelings and emotions, which is the very action of psychotherapy. Psychotherapy, however, is not the only option when seeking mental health treatment. Drug therapy has been proven to be just as viable as an option. The results of a study

conducted by (Kendrick et al., 2009) found that treatment with an SSRI plus supportive care is more effective than supportive care alone for patients with mild to moderate depression. This leads to whether men are more likely to choose drug therapy as a mental health treatment or psychotherapy.

### *Gender Role Conflict*

One particular facet of gender and mental health is Gender Role Conflict (GRC). James O'Neil conceptualized GRC, and he created the Gender Role Conflict Scale. O'Neil defined GRC as a psychological state in which socialized gender roles negatively affect the person or others. Gender role conflict occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in personal restrictions, devaluation, or violation of others or self (O'Neil et al., 1995; O'Neil, 2008). GRC is particularly interesting today as society asks men and women to adapt to new norms. Contemporary societal expectations place a dual burden on young men. On the one hand, they are encouraged to embrace inclusivity, communication, and respect towards women.

On the other hand, they are still expected to uphold traditional masculine traits that emphasize strength, ambition, and independence (Levant, 1996). On the flip side, women also face the burden of facing potential societal conflict. Research by (Hall et al. (1986), Lantz and Shroeder (1999), Marsh and Jackson (1986), and Miller and Levy 1996) suggests that female athletes often exhibit a more robust identification with masculine characteristics compared to their non-athlete counterparts. Acknowledging that GRC plays a pivotal factor in gender and mental health is a critical examination in this study.

The specific objectives of the project were the following: (1) To examine whether there are differences between women and men in seeking Psychotherapy vs. Drug therapy; (2) to find the association between Gender Role Conflict with the psychological well-being of women and men; Based on the reviewed literature, the formulated following hypotheses are: Gender influences the perception of and attitudes towards psychotherapy versus drug therapy, with females being more inclined towards psychotherapy and males more inclined towards drug therapy. The second hypothesis is that traditional masculine norms moderate the relationship between gender and perception of/attitudes towards psychotherapy vs. drug therapy, with individuals endorsing higher masculine gender roles being more likely to favor drug therapy regardless of gender.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

One hundred nine participants were gathered, including the genders of male, female, and non-binary. Participants were gathered through CloudResearch, an online platform used to gather potential respondents who received compensation of 1.50 USD for approximately 10 min.

### *Materials*

The GRCS used 30 questions that measured the domains of (Success, power, competition), Restrictive affectionate behavior between men, and conflicts between work and family relations. The following is an example question from GRCS: "Strong emotions are difficult for me to understand."

The MHSAS involved two parts, both containing nine items designed to measure respondents' overall evaluation (unfavorable vs. favorable) of seeking help from a mental health professional if they found themselves dealing with a mental health concern. A higher score indicates a more positive attitude toward seeking help. Part 1 focused explicitly on counseling and therapy, and Part 2 centered on medical treatment. The following is an example question from the MHSAS: "If I had a mental health concern, seeking medication treatment would be..."

### *Procedure*

Participants logged into cloud research and completed a consent form. They reported their gender and race. The GRCS, followed by the MHSAS, was then completed.

## **Results**

A series of ANOVA was used to test the hypothesis that females are more inclined towards psychotherapy and males are more inclined towards drug therapy. Results showed that the only significant gender differences were for the MHSAS for psychotherapy items "useful" ( $F(1, 100) = 6.42, p < .05$ ) and "good" ( $F(1, 100) = 4.16, p < .05$ ), and for the MHSAS medication items "useful" ( $F(1, 100) = 9.27, p < .05$ ) and a trend for the item "healthy" ( $F(1, 100) = 3.79, p = .054$ ). For each, female participants scored higher than male participants. See Table 1.

To test the hypothesis that "individuals endorsing higher masculine gender roles would be more likely to favor drug therapy regardless of gender," correlation analyses were conducted.

Scores for responses to the masculinity items were significantly positively correlated with MHSAS for psychotherapy items "useful" ( $r(109) = .20$ , "Healthy" ( $r(109) = .232$ , and "effective" ( $r(109) = .244$ ).

## Discussion

This study aimed to see if there are differences between the multiple genders, specifically men and women, in the seeking of Psychotherapy vs. Drug therapy as well as find an association between Gender Role Conflict with the psychological well-being of women and men. It was hypothesized that (1) females are more inclined towards psychotherapy and males more inclined towards drug therapy; (2) individuals endorsing higher masculine gender roles are more likely to favor drug therapy regardless of gender. The results failed to support both hypotheses.

The results were particularly surprising for hypothesis (1) as previous literature had found success in the examination that males are more reluctant in help-seeking attitudes than females. According to Addis and Mahalik (2003), males generally exhibit more negative attitudes toward seeking mental health services when compared to females. Studies such as Gonzalez and colleagues (2011) and Nam and colleagues (2010) have shown that being male negatively correlates with the willingness to seek mental health support and significantly predicts attitudes toward seeking help. One answer comes from the fact of male coping patterns and behaviors. Differences in coping strategies explain the underutilization of mental health services. Men, in particular, tend to employ distinct coping mechanisms, such as increased reliance on alcohol and drugs, to alleviate emotional distress (Kilpatrick et al., 2000; Möller-Leimkühler, 2002; Oliver et al., 2005; Rutz & Rihmer, 2009). This is evidenced by higher prevalence rates of substance use disorders in men (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004; Wilhelm, 2014). The objective of help-seeking tends to be influenced by mental health literacy (one's knowledge of prevention, available treatments, including self-help strategies, and symptom recognition) (Jorm, 2012). Lower utilization of mental health services has been linked to poor mental health literacy (Bonabi et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2004). Men are often perceived to have lower mental health literacy than women, exhibiting difficulties recognizing mental health disorders (Cotton et al., 2006; Swami, 2014).

Hypothesis (2) was based on the assumption and research that those with higher masculine norms prefer medication treatment as the individual is not

required to talk or speak with a mental health provider. However, the results did not support this, even though the literature provided significant evidence. Pleck (1995) suggests that societal norms, expectations, and values regarding masculine and feminine behaviors exert significant influence and hold considerable power. Mahalik and colleagues (2005) state that men who strongly adhere to masculine norms generally exhibit lower mental health levels and hold less favorable attitudes toward seeking psychological help. Notably, not all masculine norms have an equal impact, as men who prioritize self-reliance or possess sexist attitudes appear to be particularly vulnerable to these risks. Men who sanction traditional male ideals would be less likely to communicate emotions even when they believe it would be helpful (Good & Wood, 1995).

## Reccomendations

Though the results found in this study were not significant, they could be partially impacted by the study's design. The sample size was relatively low, with only 109 total participants. The majority of participants were young adults (18+). One variable that should have been emphasized in this study was race. It is recommended that all of these factors be considered for future experiments/ studies.

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