Gender Differences in Social Support, Self-Salience, and Mental Health

Ee Shin (Emily) Hum  
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, humeeshin5@gmail.com

Christina Falci  
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, cfalci2@unl.edu

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Gender Differences in Social Support, Self-Salience and Mental Health

Ee Shin (Emily) Hum & Christina Falci
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Introduction

Men and women tend to manifest distinct mental health outcomes. Specifically, women report higher levels of internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, whereas men report higher levels of externalizing symptoms, such as alcohol abuse (Rosenfield, S., Lennon, M. C., & White, H. R., 2005; Rosenfield, S., & Smith, D., 2010). However, it is unclear what mechanisms shape the gender differences in mental health outcomes. This research will explore two key possible mechanisms: social support and self-salience. This research will help us better understand the processes leading to different mental health outcomes for men and women and provide insights into reducing mental health problems in the United States.

Conceptual Model

Social Support → Mental Health

Self-Salience

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1) How and why mental health outcomes vary by gender?
2) To what extent do social support and self-salience explain the gender differences in various mental health outcomes?

• H1: Women will have more social support resources than men.
• H2: Lower social support among men will explain their higher externalizing symptoms compared to women.
• H3: For self-salience, men will prioritize their own needs above others' needs and have less permeable boundaries between their self and others.
• H4: Differences in self-salience by gender will explain women's higher internalizing symptoms compared to men.

Sample

The National, Health, Well-being and Perspectives Study is a mail survey administered to a nationally representative sample of US adults in 2015. For this poster, we analyze the survey data from 705 respondents. Women comprise 61% of the sample and men make up 39%. The sample is majority white (79.86%) and the average age is 55.5.

Measures

• Social Support: 5-point frequency scale with statements about -
  - Companionship: spending leisure time with friends or family.
  - Emotional Support: receiving love and support from friends or family.

• Self-salience: 5-point agreement scale with statements about -
  - Personal Boundary: the extent a person prioritizes the needs of others above their own.
  - Needs Hierarchy: the extent a person prioritizes the needs of others above their own.

Mental Health Concepts (Dependent)

• Internalizing: entails depressive and anxious symptoms experienced in the past 30 days such as "I felt tense" and "I felt that nothing could cheer me up."
• Externalizing: includes alcohol abuse and aggression manifest in the past 12 months such as "I had trouble controlling my drinking" and "I did something I later regretted because I had been drinking."

Mediator Concepts

• Personal Boundary: how much an individual's emotional states shape one's own emotional state, for example: "What people think of me does not affect how I feel"
• Needs Hierarchy: the extent a person prioritizes the needs of others above their own: "It is hard for me to satisfy my own needs when they interfere with the needs of others."

Findings

Table 1: OLS Regression of Mental Health on Social Support and Self-Salience *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internalizing Symptoms</th>
<th>Externalizing Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>beta</td>
<td>beta</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
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<td>Companionship</td>
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<td>-.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>-.15***</td>
<td>-.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-salience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal boundary</td>
<td>-.17***</td>
<td>-.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Hierarchy</td>
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<td>.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>.206</td>
<td>.257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* (N=705)

• All models control for age, race, marital status, education attainment, physical health, religious attendance, and own home.

The results from these analyses provide support for portions of the research hypotheses. Women have higher social support (companionship and emotional support) compared to men (F=12.91, p<.001) compared to women. Men are also more likely to prioritize their own needs before others compared to women (F=5.12, p<.05).

• Figure 1 shows significant differences for social support resources by gender. Women have more companionship (F=6.39, p<.05) and emotional support (F=13.68, P<.001) than men. Figure 1 also shows significant gender variation in self-salience. Men are more likely to prioritize their own needs before others compared to women.

Discussion

The results from these analyses provide support for portions of the research hypotheses. Women have higher social support (companionship and emotional support) compared to men (111). These differences partially mediate men's higher levels of externalizing symptoms (12). Men are less likely than women to let other people's emotions and experiences affect their own (H3). These differences partially mediate women's higher levels of externalizing symptoms (H4).

Regardless of gender, individuals can improve their mental health by having more social support resources, drawing clearer boundaries between their self and others, and putting others' needs before their own.

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References

