GENDER ROLE INTERNALIZATION, MULTIPLE ROLES, AND CHINESE WOMEN’S MENTAL HEALTH

Taryn N. Tang and Catherine S. Tang
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

The influence of gender role internalization as a moderator in the relationship between women’s multiple roles and psychological distress was investigated. Study 1 identified three components of gender role internalization, which were labeled “Traditional Ideal Person,” “Self-Sacrifice,” and “Competence Without Complaint,” and found that it did not overlap with existing gender-typed measures among 128 female Chinese university students. The multidimensionality of gender role internalization was confirmed in Study 2 among a sample of 225 women in the paid Hong Kong workforce. As expected, role quality was a better predictor of psychological distress than role quantity. Gender role internalization accounted for significant portions of explained variance even after taking role quality into account. Internalization of Traditional Ideal Person and Competence Without Complaint messages exacerbated distress in certain areas when role quality was low. However, internalization of Self-Sacrifice messages mitigated distress for Chinese women with low work quality.

Investigations into the relationship between women’s multiple roles and well-being have continued to be of empirical interest to researchers over the past three decades due to the fact that so many women are enacting roles that demand simultaneous responsibility and commitment (Green & Russo, 1993; Baruch, 1988). The evidence indicates that role quality is more important than role quantity in predicting women’s mental health and well-being (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Barnett & Marshall, 1992; Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Meleis, Norbeck, & Laffrey, 1989). Although increased formal participation of women in paid employment while maintaining their traditional roles is a global phenomenon, the resultant plethora of research into multiple roles and mental health has been conducted mostly in Western societies (Green & Russo, 1993). Furthermore, despite the inherently gendered nature of this phenomenon, there has been surprisingly little research on the influence of gender-related constructs. Therefore, in this study we examined the relationship between multiple roles and mental health among a group of employed Chinese women in Hong Kong. We focused on the roles of paid worker, spouse, and parent as these are the three most frequently reported roles for women that have been identified in other studies (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Baruch & Barnett, 1986). Of equal importance to this investigation was the examination of the degree to which changing social roles of women at the societal level were reflected at the individual psychological level. Hence, we wanted to examine the degree to which internalization of gender role messages for women affects mental health, and the relationship between role quality and mental health.

Gender Role Internalization

The internalization of gender role messages for women has been linked to various mental health problems that are more prevalent in women than men such as depression (Ali & Toner, 1996), eating disorders (Streigel-Moore, 1995; Surrey, 1991; Pinhas, Toner, Ali, Garfinkel, & Stuckless, 1999), agoraphobia (Fodor, 1974; McHugh, 1990), chronic fatigue syndrome (Abbey & Garfinkel, 1991), and functional somatic syndromes (Toner, 1994; Toner & Akman, 2000). Despite numerous theoretical postulations, however, there is a notable lack of empirical investigation regarding the influence of the internalization of gender role messages in women’s lives (Toner, Ali, Stuckless, Weaver, Akman, Tang, Quatrous, & Esplen, 1999). A major shortcoming of this literature is the lack of validated instruments to empirically assess women’s gender role internalization. Thus, Toner and her colleagues have endeavored to develop a tool to assess the extent to which women have internalized gender role messages and the extent to which internalization affects mental health.

The premise of gender role internalization is that there is a contradiction within the modern role for women (Toner et al., 1999). Women are expected to possess many...