Meso- and Micro-level Structural Sexism and Mental Health: Comparing Women and Men in Different-gender Couples

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INTRODUCTION

• Women tend to have poorer mental health compared to men
• So far, research has largely focused on individual factors to explain gender differences
• Feminist scholars argue that gender is a multi-level system & analyses should better reflect this

METHODS

• The National Couples’ Health and Time Study (NCHAT)
• Nationally-representative study of cohabiting and married U.S. adults aged 20 to 60 (N = 3642)
• STATA 16.0; weighted ordinary least square regressions
• Analyses include 968 couples where both partners completed the survey and were in different-gender relationships

Independent Variables:
• Micro-level structural sexism:
  • Respondents’ perception about the safety of their living area for women (1: not a good place – 5: good place)
• Meso-level structural sexism:
  • Between men and women partners
    • Logged ratio of annual incomes
    • Ratio of ages
    • Relative educational attainment

Dependent Variables:
• Loneliness (continuous; 3 items; α = .84)
• Depressive symptoms (continuous; 10 items; α = .87)
• Generalized anxiety (continuous; 7 items; α = .92)

RESULTS

• The safer the respondents perceived their area to be for women, the lower the level of loneliness, depression, and anxiety for both women and men
• The older the man compared to the woman, the more loneliness women reported
• Among men, having the same educational attainment as their partner was associated with higher levels of anxiety compared to when their partner had higher educational attainment

CONCLUSION

• Micro-level structural sexism was not only harmful for women’s but also for men’s mental health
• Meso-level structural sexism mattered in that:
  • Women were lonelier when there was a wider age gap with their older partners who were men
  • Men who had the same educational attainment as their partners had more anxiety
• Creating healthy relationships and safe spaces and neighborhoods for women is essential for improving both women and men’s mental health

Table 1

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<th>Loneliness</th>
<th>Depressive Symptoms</th>
<th>Generalized Anxiety</th>
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<td>Women Men</td>
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<td>Neighborhood safety for women</td>
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<td>Logged ratio of annual incomes</td>
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<td>Ratio of ages</td>
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<td>Relative educational attainment</td>
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Note: ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05