Understanding gender stereotypes and their impact on clients

Stacey Hurt

University of Northern Iowa
Abstract
Gender stereotyping has a complex and enduring history in our society, and it is an underlying factor in many issues – clients bring to counseling, including – among other things, women's and men's experience of depression (Nugent & Jones, 2005). A complicating aspect of gender stereotyping is that both males and females in our culture have been socially conditioned to fulfill many of the stereotypes imposed on them, and following stereotypical gender roles excessively can be harmful to their mental health, self-image, and interpersonal relationships (Nugent & Jones).

Counselors can use gender-role analysis and other interventions to help clients gain insight into the gender role messages and stereotypes they have grown up with and challenge these messages (Corey, 2005). Counselors can help their clients gain the insight needed to decide which gender roles and characteristics are beneficial to them, and which harmful gender stereotypes they need to detach from (Corey).
UNDERSTANDING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CLIENTS

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Stacey Hurt

May 2008
This Research Paper by: Stacey Hurt

Entitled: UNDERSTANDING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THEIR IMPACT ON CLIENTS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

Linda J. Nebbe

Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

Michael D. Waggoner

Date Received

Head, Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Postsecondary Education
Abstract

Gender stereotyping has a complex and enduring history in our society, and it is an underlying factor in many issues clients bring to counseling, including—among other things—women’s and men’s experience of depression (Nugent & Jones, 2005). A complicating aspect of gender stereotyping is that both males and females in our culture have been socially conditioned to fulfill many of the stereotypes imposed on them, and following stereotypical gender roles excessively can be harmful to their mental health, self-image, and interpersonal relationships (Nugent & Jones). Counselors can use gender-role analysis and other interventions to help clients gain insight into the gender-role messages and stereotypes they have grown up with and challenge these messages (Corey, 2005). Counselors can help their clients gain the insight needed to decide which gender roles and characteristics are beneficial to them, and which harmful gender stereotypes they need to detach from (Corey).
Understanding Gender Stereotypes and Their Impact on Clients

Gender stereotyping is still prevalent in our culture and our society today. Gender stereotyping issues are directly relevant in the realm of professional counseling. It is important for a counselor to understand clients' emotional disturbances and interpersonal conflicts in relation to underlying gender stereotyping issues. Nugent and Jones (2005) went so far as to state, “Counselors should note that gender stereotyping is usually at the root of their clients’ problems” (p. 349).

While our society tends to consider gender stereotyping in the context of its impact on women, many theorists support the fact that gender stereotyping impacts men as well. Specialists in male and female psychology emphasize that both male and female forms of emotional dysfunction are a result of societal pressure, starting at an early age, to adopt stereotypical gender-based patterns of behavior (Nugent & Jones, 2005). Hoffman (2001) emphasized the negative impact of gender stereotyping in the following passage:

Women, men, boys, and girls are constantly dealing with gender-related issues. Consciously and unconsciously, people (particularly young people) continually assess and redefine their identities as females and males and are affected by subtle pressures to maintain gender-stereotypical attitudes and behaviors that devalue both sexes and negatively affect women, men, and society. Counselors are in a key position to facilitate healthy development in this area. (p.472)

This research paper provides a written synthesis of some of the recent literature on gender stereotypes and discusses the negative impact of gender stereotyping on the emotional development and well-being of women and men. Approaches to counseling
women and men within a cultural and societal context of gender stereotyping are covered, including approaches to analyzing and de-constructing gender stereotypes with clients.

Gender Stereotypes: A Brief Overview

Gender stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics, traits, and appropriate roles of women and men, whether they are accurate or not (Zunker, 2006). These beliefs result from social and cultural influences and are internalized at the individual level, impacting one’s daily existence and interpersonal interactions (Zunker). Matlin (2000) explained gender stereotypes in the following passage:

We know that gender stereotypes influence and bias the way we think about people who belong to the social categories of male and female. Because of gender stereotypes, we exaggerate the contrast between women and men. We also consider the male experience to be “normal” whereas the female experience is the exception that requires an explanation. We also make biased judgments about females and males—for instance, when we judge whether they are feeling emotional or stressed. (p.67)

Gender stereotypes exaggerate the differences between males and females, and gender-role socialization teaches them, from an early age, to fulfill rigidly-defined gender roles and characteristics. The pressure to maintain gender-stereotypical attitudes and behaviors negatively impacts women, men, and society (Hoffman, 2001). Research indicates men and women are emotionally healthier and function better when they are not restricted to traditional gender-stereotypical patterns of behavior and role-enactment (Hoffman).
Women: Issues with Gender Stereotyping

Roles, Stereotypes, and Expectations of Women

Throughout history, there have been no known cultures in which women have held primary positions of power and authority (Holmshaw & Hillier, 2000). Clearly defined male and female roles have been the norm throughout history, with women being assigned subordinate roles, including childbearing, and nurturing and caring for others (Holmshaw & Hillier). While many would argue there are important positive aspects of these stereotypical female roles, women also suffer negative consequences of being assigned these roles (Nugent & Jones, 2005). Female roles have been devalued in our society and considered inferior to the roles of men, and women have been socially conditioned to subordinate their own needs to the needs of men (Nugent & Jones).

Female dependence on interpersonal relationships is a gender stereotype which has been perpetuated and fulfilled. Starting at an early age, females are socialized to be passive, compliant, and highly invested in interpersonal relationships (Kirsh & Kuiper, 2002). While females have been socially conditioned to make connections with others in the form of interpersonal relationships, at the same time our society devalues the female tendency toward relational connectedness, and instead values the stereotypical male traits of independence and autonomy (Nugent & Jones, 2005). Therefore, females tend to harbor a negative self-attitude regarding their so-called neediness in relationships, due to the fact that our culture esteems the masculine characteristics of individuation and separation (Nugent & Jones).

Arredondo (1992) discussed how, in addition to the traditional stereotypes regarding female roles in our culture, women in today’s society are also subjected to
modernized gender stereotypes that are largely a result of backlash against the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. One result of feminist backlash is our society’s negative view of women expressing anger and women possessing power, which Arredondo discussed in the following passage:

While women continue to feel inner conflict about expressing anger, men have equally ambivalent feelings about dealing with women’s anger. In the workplace, a woman is labeled as a “bitch” if she communicates angrily or authoritatively. Men and women alike have trivialized women’s anger, attributing it to “that time of the month” or making other equally demeaning comments. (p. 8)

Social prohibitions dictate that it is unacceptable or unseemly for women to express anger, except perhaps in defense of their children or spouse (Arredondo, 1992). Therefore, Arredondo explained, women in our society are compelled by deeply imbedded social conditioning to repress their anger.

Impact on Women’s Mental Health and Overall Well-being

Women suffer negative consequences as a result of gender-role stereotyping, such as feelings of a lack of power, lack of control, lack of self-confidence, lack of assertiveness, and low self-esteem (Nugent & Jones, 2005). Various theorists agree that depression in women commonly results from underlying gender stereotyping issues, particularly the roles women are expected to fulfill in relationships (Nugent & Jones).

Research indicates that while women are socialized to value relatedness, they also desire autonomy, and this contradiction may lead to increased rates of depression in women (Kirsh & Kuiper, 2002). Holmshaw and Hillier (2000) stated, “The lack of
autonomy and the limited nature of many women’s social roles produces frustration, tension and is the source of psychological distress for many women” (p.56).

Many women experience psychological distress due to societal expectations and cultural messages pressuring them to place high importance on interpersonal relationships, particularly their relationships with men. Women tend to become self-sacrificing and self-silencing in their relationships, in order to maintain the relationship (Jack, 1991). This can lead to a loss of a sense of self, lower self-esteem, and depression (Jack).

Because women’s direct expression of anger is viewed negatively in our society and is not congruent with their expected roles as nurturing, compliant caregivers, women commonly mask their anger, particularly in their relationships with men (Jack, 1999). Women’s tendency to repress their anger, rather than express it, can lead to internal conflict and mental health difficulties (Arredondo, 1992). When it is not expressed outwardly in relationships, women may suppress or internalize their aggression, and it may manifest as depression, or it may manifest in self-destructive behaviors such as eating disorders, drinking, and drug use (Jack). Arredondo added, “Clinicians often have referred to women’s depression as anger turned inward” (p.8). A vicious cycle is created as women who are depressed, have low self-esteem, and lack self-confidence are more likely to remain in abusive relationships, and women’s experience of physical abuse and domestic violence may further contribute to their self-silencing behaviors and suppressed aggression (Jack).

Stereotypes about women and marriage represent another layer within the complex issue of gender stereotyping. Contrary to the popular cultural stereotype that
women's top priority is to secure a husband, while men dread and avoid marriage, research indicates marriage is beneficial to men's mental health and detrimental to women's mental health (McGoldrick, 2005). Research shows that—compared to single men—married men are healthier, have more satisfying sex lives, make more money, are more educated, have lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse, and have lower rates of depression (McGoldrick). Women do not enjoy the same benefits of marriage that men do. Single women are physically and mentally healthier than married women, tend to make more money and have more education, are burdened with fewer roles and responsibilities in the home, and even have lower crime statistics than married women (McGoldrick). Although roles are changing and some men are doing more household work, many married women still carry the burden of being the primary caretaker for the home and children, and this commonly has a negative impact on their physical and mental well-being (Lasswell, 2002).

Lasswell (2002) summarized findings from research on this topic in the following passage:

Study after study has reported that married men are more satisfied with being married than married women are (Amato & Booth, 1995; Levinson et al., 1993). Research continues to find that married men are less depressed than either married women or single men, and are more satisfied with their lives than single men (Fowers, 1991; Steil & Turetsky, 1987; Gottman, 1994). . . . It is proposed that a woman's view of her own well-being is more closely tied to the relationship than is a man's. Consequently, if there is distress in the marriage, the woman is uniquely at risk for depression (Koerner, et al., 1994; Hammen, 1991). Some
have reported that women's marital dissatisfaction and consequent depression are correlated with unequal distribution of labor, which disfavors wives (Whistman & Jacobson, 1989). (p.526)

Therefore, the popular gender stereotype that a major ambition of women is (or should be) to get married is counterintuitive to what the research demonstrates, and it may actually be harmful for women to adhere to social norms pressuring them to get married.

Men: Issues with Gender Stereotyping

*Roles, Stereotypes, and Expectations of Men*

Gender-stereotypical roles and expectations are imposed on men as well. Men are expected to be competitive and strive for success, to appear competent and assertive, and never to appear vulnerable (Nugent & Jones, 2005). Starting at a very young age, males experience societal pressures to be self-reliant, strong, and dominating (Real, 1997). They receive cultural messages telling them to disregard any of their own emotions, especially feelings related to tenderness, fear, and grief, because society dictates that showing feelings is a shameful thing for males to do (Real). Zunker (2006) wrote, "The expression of grief, pain, or weakness is perceived to be especially unmanly. It appears that some men have been socialized to believe that restricting their display of emotions is a signal to others of their strong masculinity" (p.311).

Research indicates fear of femininity and restrictive emotionality have been indoctrinated in males through gender role socialization (Zunker 2006). Emotional expressiveness is linked to femininity in our society, and males are socialized to devalue femininity and to fear being perceived as possessing any remotely feminine
characteristics (Wong, Pituch, & Rochlen, 2006). Kimmel (2000) wrote, “The fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood. It starts so early" (p.214).

In addition to denying their emotions, men are taught to devalue their relationships. While females in our culture have been encouraged to develop relationships, males have been socially conditioned to become independent and competitive and minimize the importance of their interpersonal relationships (Real, 1997).

*Impact on Men’s Mental Health and Overall Well-being*

Gender stereotypes and expectations can be detrimental to men’s well-being. Real (1997) claimed that male psychological dysfunctions result from society pressuring males from a young age to perpetuate stereotypical masculine behaviors. McCarthy and Holiday (2004) explained “masculine role conflict” as referring to “the amount of strain that men encounter in their attempts to live up to the standards set by society. This distress experienced by men may lead to restriction of emotion and other problematic behavior” p.26.

McCarthy and Holiday (2004) stated that gender role conflict contributes greatly to depression among men. They pointed out that depression in men is under-diagnosed because men tend to experience depression in ways that are different from the behaviors generally believed to indicate depression. Real (1997) agreed that depression among men tends to be masked because they are not expected to manifest feelings of depression the way women do, and males tend to develop harmful defense mechanisms to avoid showing their feelings. As a result, male depression may be manifested in angry,
antisocial, emotionally withdrawn, violent, addictive, and self-destructive behaviors, such as alcohol abuse, fighting, gambling, sexual addictions, and workaholism (McCarthy & Holiday; Real). These behaviors are a form of "self-medication" and contribute to men feeling more disconnected from themselves and their loved ones (Real). Real referred to masked male depression as "covert depression."

Cohn and Zeichner's research (2006) indicated a link between male gender role socialization and interpersonal violence. They found that men who experience more gender role stress—in other words, are more concerned with adhering to traditional masculine role norms—are more likely to demonstrate physical, interpersonal aggression, compared to men who are less concerned with fulfilling a traditional masculine identity.

Men's restrictive emotionality may negatively impact their interpersonal relationships, even when violence is not a factor (Zunker, 2006). Relationships are typically built on trust and caring, and men's lack of emotional expressiveness sends a message of not caring, a lack of interest, and disregard for others (Zunker). Real (2002) added that—due to gender-based socialization processes pressuring males to become autonomous and independent from a young age—men tend to have difficulty establishing intimacy in interpersonal relationships later in life.

In addition to the emotional and psychological effects of gender stereotyping, men's physical health may also be jeopardized by the stress and strain of trying to fulfill traditional masculine roles. When men follow their expected masculine roles excessively (in terms of competitiveness, workaholic behavior, restrictive emotionality, etc.), they are more susceptible to physical health problems such as ulcers, high blood pressure, and heart attacks (Nugent & Jones, 2005).
Understanding Gender Stereotypes

Working with Clients

Analyzing and De-constructing Gender Stereotypes

Zunker (2006) suggested the root of clients’ problems can be identified as what they perceive to be their appropriate gender roles, and these perceptions are shaped by external and internal factors. As described in previous sections of this paper, clients who adhere to stereotypical gender roles may experience psychological distress and may behave in ways that are detrimental to their overall well-being. Zunker explained that faulty private logic regarding gender roles can result in problematic interpersonal interactions and other maladaptive behaviors.

Zunker (2006) suggested gender stereotyping beliefs should be addressed through examining faulty private logic. Counselors should focus on the source of thinking scripts regarding gender and help clients restructure and modify maladaptive beliefs (Zunker). The goal is for clients to examine their beliefs regarding gender and how it impacts their daily interactions and overall well-being (Zunker).

Corey (2005) referred to this process as gender-role analysis. Gender-role analysis is an intervention counselors use with male and female clients to help them gain insight into how gender-role stereotypes have negatively impacted their psychological well-being (Corey). The counselor helps the client evaluate how the gender-role messages he or she has received from society, from the mass media, and from his own family throughout his life have impacted his psychological well-being, and helps the client to break free from the gender-role stereotypes imposed on him, if the client wishes to do so (Corey). The client and counselor work together to discover ways to challenge, change, and/or completely reject these messages, and together they develop a plan to
implement these changes in the client's daily life (Corey). The emphasis lies in exploring the societal context of the client's issues, rather than defining the client's issues as residing completely within herself (Corey).

Gender-role analysis is useful for the client because he can draw upon the insights gained in counseling to make decisions about future emotional and behavioral reactions to gender-role stereotyping, and whether or not to accept the stereotypical roles assigned to him (Corey). The client may choose to break free from the gender-role stereotypes imposed on her, as an important step in working to improve upon her own emotional well-being and daily interactions with others (Corey).

Re-conceptualizing Masculinity and Femininity

Feminist therapists feel men and women can work together to create social change, so it becomes more acceptable for both men and women to possess “masculine” traits (strength, courage, assertiveness, etc.) as well as “feminine” traits (nurture, tenderness, relational connectedness, etc.), as each of these traits contributes positively to human interactions and an individual sense of well-being (Corey, 2005). Hoffman (2001) suggested counselors help both male and female clients gain insights regarding the usefulness of expressing both “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics. She also advocated a need to change how we label these characteristics. Hoffman stated, “If counseling professionals are serious about improving gender relations as well as the well-being of both women and men, we need to reclassify as ‘human’ the traits that we keep labeling ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (p.481). Hoffman emphasized the importance of focusing on our commonalities as humans, rather than continuing to perpetuate stereotypes based on gender polarization.
Working with clients to re-conceptualize masculinity and femininity can include an analysis of the importance placed on autonomy and independence versus interpersonal relationships. Kirsh and Kuiper (2002) stated a need for treatment approaches "to more completely acknowledge the potential importance of both individualism and relatedness themes to both women and men" (p.84). The authors suggested counselors work with their clients to assess what roles individualism and relatedness play in their daily lives and acknowledge where one or both of these themes may be lacking. They further suggest counselors and clients work to develop counseling goals based on integrating relatedness and individualism themes in ways that are most optimal for the individual client.

Special Considerations in Working with Women

There are some important concepts to consider in working with women in counseling. Feminist therapists believe counselors should consider the importance of helping women reframe their "mental illness" (for example, depression) to incorporate not only inner sources of emotional disturbance, but also the environmental influences and stressors she is reacting to and coping with, including oppressive, gender-related expectations (Corey, 2005). The client and counselor work together to analyze the social structures, such as sexism and oppression that have contributed to the client's distress (Corey). Additionally, feminist therapists work to establish a collaborative relationship with their clients, share their hypotheses with clients, and invite clients to ask questions and offer alternatives (Evans, Kincade, Marbly, & Seem, 2005). Feminist therapists feel egalitarian approaches are particularly important in working with female clients, as
opposed to more traditional psychotherapy approaches which promote a power
differential between the client and counselor (Evans et al.).

Another potential goal in counseling women is redefining the female tendency
toward relational connectedness as a strength and an asset, rather than as a weakness, as it
has been cast in a society which emphasizes independence and autonomy as key strengths
(Corey, 2005). Wastell (1996) also emphasized the importance of positively reframing
interpersonal connectedness, rather than replicating society’s rejection of women’s
tendency toward connectedness in favor of men’s tendency toward independence.
Wastell advocated shifting the focus of counseling from the perceived deficiencies of the
client to an exploration of her behaviors as a reaction to societal norms and expectations.
The client can then decide to what extent—if at all—she would like to work on changing
her behaviors (Wastell).

Additionally, women can work toward the goal of learning to develop
interpersonal relationships in which they are mutually empowered with others, as
opposed to relationships in which they are self-silencing and self-sacrificing (Miller &
Stiver, 1997). Counselors can help women achieve this goal in individual counseling
through a growth fostering client-counselor relationship in which the counselor displays
empathy and responsiveness to the client (Miller & Stiver). Miller and Stiver claimed a
counselor’s engagement in “mutual empathy” with a client not only helps her feel
understood, but also helps free her from feeling immobilized, and enables her to take
action and make changes in her life

Miller and Stiver (1997) summarized their view of the importance of the client-
counselor relationship in the following passage:
We believe that the centerpiece of psychotherapy is the creation of a new relationship—a relationship in which the patient can include more of herself, that is, more of her experience and of her feelings about that experience, the parts she has had to keep out of relationships in the past. (p.177)

All-female counseling groups can also help women learn to be mutually empowered through relationships with others. Lee and Robbins (2000) stated, “...she may benefit from group therapy with other women in which the focus of treatment is on relational interdependence (e.g., one-on-one intimacy and emotional availability; Jordan et al., 1991; Nelson, 1996)...women may benefit from learning to differentiate themselves from others while maintaining harmonious relationships with others” (p. 488-489).

*Special Considerations in Working with Men*

McCarthy and Holiday (2004) pointed out that men seek counseling services much less commonly than women do, although men are believed to struggle with emotional distress due to gender role pressures and stereotypes, among other issues—as much or more than women do. McCarthy and Holiday attributed men’s general reluctance to seek counseling to societal pressures and gender stereotypes which dictate that men are strong, competent, and never vulnerable, and that men do not discuss their emotions. Men are affected by these stereotypes and the expectations that are imposed upon them, and are therefore less likely to seek help because they do not want to appear weak or incompetent.

Men have been socially conditioned to be averse to the counseling process, because it involves emotional exploration and expression (McCarthy & Holiday, 2004).
Therefore, McCarthy and Holiday proposed that counselors consider alternative approaches to traditional counseling methods when counseling men. The authors suggested counselors begin by providing positive acknowledgment of their decision to seek help, thereby positioning male clients’ help-seeking decision as an indication of personal strength—rather than personal defeat—from the start of the counseling process. McCarthy and Holiday also suggested counselors provide clearer expectations about the counseling process to their male clients, in order to decrease misunderstandings and early termination rates among male clients.

McCarthy and Holiday (2004) advised counselors who work with male clients should accumulate knowledge about the male experience in our society, including the gender stereotypes which have been imposed on men and sometimes fulfilled among men due to the socialization process in our culture. McCarthy and Holiday discussed the need for counselors to acknowledge their own personal biases against men and the negative male stereotypes they personally harbor. The authors pointed out that counselors’ negative perceptions and beliefs about men can interfere with the counseling process. McCarthy and Holiday suggested that—throughout the counseling process with male clients—counselors should emphasize the positive assets which are generally attributed to the male gender, rather than focus on the so-called problematic behaviors attributed to men. The authors stated:

Their masculinity itself provides men with several important and valuable strengths both in and out of the counseling sessions, many of which may not be validated by professionals. Levant and Kopecky (1995) outlined such qualities, which include showing love to others through favors and gifts; enduring
difficulties for the sake of loved ones; and putting aside their own needs in providing for others. One way for counselors to uncover such strengths is through empathy, particularly with traditional male clients, for it may be difficult for these men to comprehend or honor their assets (Brooks, 1998).

McCarthy and Holiday also discussed the benefits of all-male counseling groups. The authors pointed out that the group atmosphere provides men the opportunity to work on their communication skills by sharing their emotional experiences with one another, and it also allows men to establish emotional connections with one another and provide support and encouragement to one another. Group counseling is believed to be particularly helpful for men working to modify the effects of gender-role socialization (Zunker, 2006). Zunker suggested using cognitive-behavioral techniques such as restructuring, reframing, and modeling in group counseling with men, as well as focusing on emotional expressiveness. Zunker summarized, “The primary goal here is to change rigid gender role masculine behavior” (p.312).

Kimmel (2000) provided an optimistic viewpoint on men’s capacity for change in the following passage:

The idea that manhood is socially constructed and historically shifting should not be understood as loss, that something is being taken away from men. Instead, it gives us something extraordinarily valuable—agency, the capacity to act . . . Our behaviors are not simply “just human nature,” because “boys will be boys.” From the materials we find around us in our culture—other people, ideas, objects—we actively create our worlds, our identities. Men, both individually and collectively, can change . . . (p.213)
Conclusion

Literature on the topic indicates both women and men are restricted by traditional gender-role stereotypes, and women and men can live most optimally when both their “feminine” and “masculine” characteristics are given free range of expression (Hoffman, 2001). Feminist therapists feel men and women can work together to create social change, so it becomes more acceptable for both men and women to possess “masculine” traits as well as “feminine” traits (Corey, 2005). Professional counselors can contribute to making important changes in a society that is still plagued by gender stereotypes. Specific counseling interventions, such as gender-role analysis, are designed to liberate clients from gender-stereotypical roles and behaviors and empower them to redefine themselves in light of new insights gained in therapy.
References


