

Title: Gender and the mental health of women

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Abstract:

The origins of the recent interest in gender and mental healthcare discussed, and in this context the controversy over the meaning of the apparent higher incidence of mental illness in women is examined. Several approaches are distinguished in the current investigation into the differential incidence of mental illness, both between and within the sex groups. Work reviewed here includes attempts to establish links between the mental health of women and: their reproductive system; their gender roles; and the ways that they structure and define their identities. The community studies reported here are part of the latter inquiry, and specifically address the way that women's mental health may be affected by the extent to which they define themselves in terms of gender stereotypes. Some insights are gained into the processes which mediate the relationship between femininity, masculinity, and mental health. However, only equivocal support was found for the advantages of an androgynous self-definition. Furthermore, for these women their femininity was a more important predictor of their mental health than their masculinity. It is noted, that the relative importance of masculinity and femininity is opposite to that found in other studies carried out within this paradigm. However, these studies have typically been carried out with students, whereas this research was carried out with samples of women drawn from the general population. This observation, in conjunction with other findings reported here, is used as a basis for arguing the importance of including contextual factors when examining the issue of sex-typing and mental health. More specifically, it is suggested to be crucial for this literature's development to take full account of the fact that gender stereotypes are not just a source of self-definition. They are part of a dynamic process by which inequalities between the sexes are maintained and changed at both the intergroup and interpersonal level