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Relevance of gender roles in life satisfaction in adult people



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the relevance of self-identification in traditional gender roles of masculinity and femininity in women's and men's life satisfaction. Participants consisted of 1233 women and 1233 men from the Spanish general population aged between 20 and 60 years. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses showed that although in both genders the most important predictors of life satisfaction were self-esteem and social support, both masculinity and femininity were associated with higher life satisfaction in women and men. Besides, in the prediction of life satisfaction, femininity interacted with social support in women, and masculinity with self-esteem in men, and it was found that the association between femininity and life satisfaction only occurred in women with high social support, and self-esteem was associated with life satisfaction only in men with low masculinity. These results provide information concerning the significance of adherence to gender roles in life satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Global life satisfaction refers to the global judgment by an individual on their life experience in general, and is an important component of well-being. According to Diener and Diener (1995, p. 653) "Subjective well-being is a person's evaluative reactions to his or her life—either in terms of life satisfaction (cognitive evaluations) or affect (ongoing emotional reactions)". The individual's judgment is important in the investigation of individual well-being, and in the evaluation of the quality of life of societies (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013).

Subjective well-being has been associated with variables such as health, social contact, activity, and personality (Diener, 1984), and its demographic correlates have been also studied. Individual differences in life satisfaction have been explained by different variables and two basic theoretical accounts have been recognized: *top-down* approaches, which emphasize the role of personal variables, and *bottom-up* approaches, that focus on the role of situations, events, and contexts (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004). In addition, marital and socioeconomic status have been associated with life satisfaction (Liu, Li, & Feldman, 2013; Salinas-Jiménez, Artés, & Salinas-Jiménez, 2013; Schoon, Hanson, & Salmela-Aro, 2005; Ye, Yu, & Li, 2012).

Self-esteem and social support have been found to be robust correlates of life satisfaction. However, although there is evidence that self-esteem is an important predictor of life satisfaction, the extent

of this association differs among countries, and it has been found that the correlation between self-esteem and life satisfaction is moderated by the individualism of society (Diener & Diener, 1995). The individual's construal of the self, of others, and of the interdependence between the self and others differs among different cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Individualistic cultures promote an independent self-construal, encourage values such as freedom or happiness, and usually value the individual's autonomy, self-responsibility, and uniqueness (Realo, Koido, Ceulemans, & Allik, 2002), therefore, personal values are more significant in life satisfaction. Collectivistic cultures promote interdependent self-construal, sense of belonging to a group, and emotional dependence on the family. Therefore, in said cultures, life satisfaction of an individual can derive more from his/her ingroup than from his/her self-esteem (Diener & Diener, 1995). There is evidence that satisfaction with life is also associated with social support (Glaesmer, Grande, Braehler, & Roth, 2011; Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012; Song, Kong, & Jin, 2013), and this association seems to occur in both collectivistic and individualistic cultures (Koydemir, Simsek, Schütz, & Tipandjan, 2013).

However, there is diversity among individuals who inhabit a certain country, and there are also differences among people in the same culture, and it has been suggested that gender is an important aspect in self-construal. Cross and Madson (1997) state that, in general, in the United States men are pressed to construct and maintain an independent self-construal, while women are pressed to construct and maintain an interdependent self-construal. However, this does not happen only in the United States but, as suggested by Bem (1981), all societies assign differentiated adult roles based

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on sex, and anticipate this assignment at early childhood through socialization. Individuals are expected to acquire not only sex-specific skills, but also sex-specific concepts, and certain personality attributes, to become masculine and feminine through a process called sex typing. The central characteristic of masculinity is agency, which is characterized by focus on the self, and separation from others, while the central characteristic of femininity is communion, characterized by focus on others and forming connections (Helgeson, 1994; Reid, 2004). Masculinity is associated with instrumental characteristics such as independence, leadership, assertiveness and decision-making, and femininity is associated with expressive characteristics, with an emphasis on the relationship with others, and affective qualities such as kindness, sensitivity to others, emotional responsiveness, and the need for affiliation (Spence, Deaux, & Helmreich, 1985; Twengue, 1999).

Gender roles are culturally reinforced rules that shape the appropriate behaviors for men and women. They refer to the expectations about what behaviors are appropriate for people of one gender, i.e., a set of prescriptions and proscriptions for each gender in accordance with which individuals are expected to behave (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). It has been suggested that gender is a fundamental element in human identity, given that in most cases gender assignment is immutable, and that many fundamental aspects of life which include work, educational and recreational activities, and relationship with others, which people are expected to pursue, are governed by gender (Egan & Perry, 2001).

Though traditionally it was considered that psychological well-being was improved when the fulfilled gender role corresponded to the individual's gender, and gender-typed people enjoyed better mental health, empirical evidence regarding this theory is incomplete (DiDonato & Berenbaum, 2013; Whitley, 1983). Although the significance of the self-attribution of characteristics associated with gender roles in the well-being of women and men is a matter not yet solved, it is considered that both agency and communion are important in well-being (Helgeson, 1994). Besides, it is suggested that strict adherence to masculine and feminine roles can limit the range of socially acceptable behaviors and choices which are potentially available to women and men (Parent & Moradi, 2010). However, in spite of said evidence, the differential socialization of women and men, and the pressure exerted on them to acquire and develop differentiated skills and roles still continue to exist. And, even if some changes seem to have taken place in the last few years, society in general, and the media in particular, continue to promote and encourage different women's and men's self-construal in line with the traditional values of masculinity for men, and femininity for women. Therefore, it is important to know the significance of adherence to traditional gender roles in women's and men's life satisfaction nowadays. And because the central characteristic of masculinity is agency, characterized by focus on the self, and the central characteristic of femininity is communion, characterized by focus on others and by forming connections, we analyze in this paper the extent to which masculinity and femininity interact with self-esteem and social support in the prediction of life satisfaction.

Our first hypothesis is that life satisfaction will be higher in women and men who do not identify themselves only with the gender role traditionally attributed to them, but include in their self-concept instrumental and expressive traits. Our second hypothesis is that in men, adherence to traditional gender roles will moderate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction, and therefore, self-esteem will be more associated with life satisfaction in men who identify themselves to a greater extent with the characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity. The third hypothesis suggests that in women, adherence to traditional gender roles will moderate the relationship between social support and life satisfaction, and that social support will be more

associated with life satisfaction in women who identify themselves to a greater extent with the characteristics traditionally associated with femininity.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 2466 individuals (50% women, 50% men) from the Spanish general population. Their ages ranged from 20 to 60 years ($M = 33.61$, $SD = 11.13$), and they had different educational levels: 19.3% had only primary education, 8.6% had basic vocational training, 32.7% secondary education, 13.4% 3-year university degrees, and 26.0% 5-year university degrees. They had also different occupations: 15.9% were students, 31.8% skilled/unskilled manual workers, 29.1% white-collar workers, 17.9% professionals, 5.4% housewives. As regards marital status, 51.5% were single, 42.5% married, or had a domestic partner, 5.3% divorced, and 0.7% widowed. As to parenthood, 57.9% of the women and 63.7% of the men had no children. The mean of number of children was higher for women than for men, as can be seen in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Life satisfaction

The satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is made up of 5 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This instrument has been used in several countries, including Spain, where it has shown adequate psychometric properties (Atienza, Balaguer, & Garcia-Merita, 2003). All items were translated into Spanish and back translated into English by the research team plus two bilingual persons. For the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .85.

2.2.2. Gender roles

We used the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974). The BSRI contains 60 items consisting of adjectives or short sentences, 20 of which refer to masculine traits, 20 to female traits, and the other 20 to traits attributable to both genders. The response format is a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never or almost never true*) to 7 (*always or almost always true*). The BSRI is a widely used self-report instrument to measure gender role adherence (Kasen, Chen, Sneed, Crawford, & Cohen, 2006; March, Grieve, Marx, & Witteveen, 2013). All items were translated into Spanish and back translated into English by the research team plus two bilingual persons, a native English-speaking professional translator, and a native speaker of Spanish. For the current sample, the alpha coefficient was .83 for masculinity and .74 for femininity.

2.2.3. Self-esteem

The Self-Esteem Inventory (Rector & Roger, 1993) is an instrument made up of 58 items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*always*), which reflect various evaluative self-domains, including personal, interpersonal, familial, achievement, physical attractiveness, and the degree of uncertainty across the domains. The translated version of this inventory was validated in a large sample of Spanish people, and the exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis yielded a second-order factor of self-esteem, with an internal consistency of .93 (Matud, Ibañez, Marrero, & Carballeira, 2003). For the current sample, the alpha coefficient was .94.

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