Gender Role Expectations in the Context of Pain: What is the Role of Socioeconomic Status?

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Introduction

Chronic pain is characterized by the persistence of pain, for a minimum period of **3 months**, beyond the repair of the lesion. In Portugal, chronic pain affects **37% of the population**. However, more vulnerable groups, such as **women** or individuals with a **lower socioeconomic status (SES)** revealed a higher burden of chronic pain. Research studies demonstrated the influence of **gender role expectations** (i.e., socially constructed representations of what means to be and act like a man or woman) on chronic pain assessment and treatment. Nevertheless, it is not clear if this happens regardless of the **patient's SES**. Thus, **intersectionality** emerges as a valuable tool to promote the knowledge of health inequalities, by examining how **multiple psychosocial factors** interact to shape and influence human experience.

Aim

The main purpose of this exploratory study is to contribute to a better understanding of the gender role expectations and SES in chronic pain. Specifically, we aim to investigate how laypeople perceive men and women with chronic pain from different SES regarding: (a) pain sensitivity; (b) pain tolerance; and (c) willingness to express pain.

Method

Participants

Sociodemographic Characteristics

- N = 227 lay people (56,8% **women**)
- Age **18 - 82 years old** ($M=37.52$, $SD=14.07$)
- 12th grade (44.5%) or Higher education (42.7%)
- Wide range of professional activities (e.g., factory worker, pharmacist)
- 69.7% with annual household income < **20 000€**

Pain Experience

- **36.7%** suffers from chronic pain
- Several people experience pain daily or weekly
- The average **pain intensity is 6.27** out of 10 ($SD=1.87$)
- 70.2% know people who suffer from chronic pain

Design & Measures

A **quasi-experimental design 2x3x2** was used, where the imagined person's sex (**woman vs. man**) and SES (**low, middle, or high**) was manipulated. We also took into consideration the **natural variable of participants' sex** (woman vs. man). The participants were randomly allocated to one of the **six experimental conditions**. It was decided a priori include around **30 individuals per condition**.

"At the top of the ladder are people with better socioeconomic status – they have more money, higher levels of education and more respected jobs. At the bottom, are the people with the worst socioeconomic status – they have less money, lower levels of education, and less valued jobs. Now, try to visualize in your mind a Portuguese **man/woman**, between 45 and 50 years old, with a **low/medium/high socioeconomic status**, that is, located between **2/3 or 5/6 or 8/9 steps of the ladder** presented above. Imagine that this **man/woman** has suffered from constant low back pain for more than 3 months."

3 questions adapted from the Portuguese version of the *Gender Role Expectations of Pain* (11) regarding: (a) **pain sensitivity**; (b) **pain tolerance**; and (c) **willingness to express pain**.

The *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status* (10) was used to describe the organization of SES in Portuguese society

Results

Figure 1. Mean pain tolerance attributed to the imagined men and women of different SES, by participants' sex.

Pain tolerance perception was influenced by the **sex and SES** of the imagined person and by **the sex of the participant**, $F(2, 209) = 3.14$, $p < .05$

Male Participants

- ♀ High SES > ♂ High SES*
- ♀ ≠ SES are perceived by male participants as having the same tolerance level of pain
- ♂ ≠ SES are perceived by male participants as having the same tolerance level of pain

Female Participants

- ♀ Medium SES > ♀ High SES*
- ♂ Low SES > ♂ High SES*

However, **no significant** main or interaction effects were found concerning **pain sensitivity and willingness to express pain**. Participants' perception of pain sensitivity is similar for the imagined men and women, for all levels of SES (i.e., low, medium, and high).

Conclusion

This study represents a first step towards understanding how **SES influences gender role expectations** in the context of **chronic pain**; however, the sex and SES of the person in pain are not the only variables at stake, as the **sex of the observer** plays a significant role in the differences found in the **gendered class role expectations** regarding pain behaviors.

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