



EXPLORATION OF EMOTIONALITY AND STRESS AMONG YOUNG ATHLETES IN COMPETITIVE SPORTS

Aayushi Tejrana ¹ and Prof. Pragyendu ²

AFFILIATIONS

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Delhi Email-aayushitejrana@gmail.com

² Department of Psychology, Sri Aurobindo College

Correspondence Author-Aayushi Tejrana, Department of Psychology, University of Delhi Email-aayushitejrana@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Sports is a highly competitive field which is rampant with stressors both internal and external to the individual. Individual level stressors for the athlete may include deselection, injury, coping with training and competition demands, rehabilitation and mental health outcomes associated with playing under stress and strain. The current study is an exploration of restrictive emotionality, perceived stress and ideas of masculinity among young Indian athletes males, within the age group of 18-26 years, representing India at state-level athletic competition. A mixed-method approach that utilised a sequential exploratory design was adopted for the purpose of the current study and data was collected from 89 young male athletes. Within the quantitative phase, scales of gender role conflict and perceived stress were administered to 89 male participants. Followed by a second phase, where in-depth qualitative interviews, based on predetermined criteria were carried out with 4 of the participants to gain an understanding of their ideas of masculinity, stressors they encounter and coping resources they employ. The results revealed that the ideas of masculinity that these men hold determine to a great extent their perception of their male gender role and restrictive emotionality. Perceived stress moderately positively correlated with restrictive emotionality.

Keywords: athletes, mental health, well-being, gender role, psychology, mixed method study

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender influences our life choices and decisions, and much of its influence may come across as unconscious. While some individuals do acknowledge the force that gender exerts in the choices they make, such as the employment they seek, the foods they prefer and the lifestyles they adopt, a vast majority is often oblivious to this over-encompassing force that is often exerted by an individual's gender. [Mick (2008), Nu (1996) and Cook (2005)].

The conceptual understanding of gender has moved from a biological model to a cultural model. (Jansz, 2000). Children, from an early age, are reinforced with phrases such as “men don't cry” “take it like a man” “don't be such a girl” or “girls like pink” that tend to dictate rules as well as gender-specific behaviours that the individual must adhere to.

The psychology of men, which developed as an undertone of the feminist movement in the 1970s brought in its wake, an interest in the psychological and social life of men. Contemporary research shed light on these culturally prevalent models of masculinity. One of the most prominent theories within this domain is the gender role conflict theory proposed by O'Neil, which identified four dimensions of these masculine gender roles. These are Success, power and competition, Restrictive emotionality, Restrictive affectionate behaviour between men and conflict between work and family relations. The dimension of success, power and competition reflects how men are socialized to be the breadwinner at home and take on the role of a provider. Such pressure to achieve might lead to a developing fear of failure and a general obsession to achieve. (O'Neil, 1981). When it comes to restrictive emotionality, it indicates the challenges men might face in expressing their emotions and vulnerabilities. This again may stem from a generalised belief in society that being too open with one's feelings is a sign of weakness and should not be exhibited by men. Restrictive affectionate behaviour between men refers to feelings of hesitancy exhibited by men to engage with each other affectionately, as it tends to starkly differ from the “aggressive” gender role ascribed to men. Of all of these dimensions, restrictive emotionality has been the most widely studied. The general result of research in this domain has indicated that men tend to overall conceal their emotions more than women. (Brody and Hall 1993; Fisher 1993).

The stress or strain experienced by individuals due to the operation of these idealized versions of masculinity had been elaborated upon by Joseph Pleck, who put forth that men experience three varieties of gender role strain, as a result of these idealized versions of manhood, namely the discrepancy strain, the dysfunctional strain and the trauma strain. Significant research has pointed out that men experience considerable stress as an operation of their gender role. (Reidy et al 2016; Cohen A. et al 2006).

In the Indian context, there exists a significant dearth of research literature that focuses on the gender role conflict or stress that may be experienced by young Indian males as a result of the operation of their male gender norms.

There may also be certain ideas of masculinity that the men may hold. These ideas of masculinity may be rooted within the cultural or socio-political environment of these men. These ideas of masculinity may comprise concepts such as ‘achievement’ “aggressiveness” and “bearing the tribulations of life with a stiff upper lip, not admitting dependence on others” (Jansz, 2000).

Rationale for the current study

Gender role studies particularly in the context of sports, adopting a cultural, grounded lens to understanding men and their unique challenges has constituted a significant gap in literature. There is a need to understand the person in the sport, who experiences and copes with unique

demands of their profession. A lot of prior literature has focused on female athletes and the unique adversities they counter and ways they adopt to cope with these significant adversities. (Tamminen et al. 2013), a similar investigation has been missing in the context of Indian male sportspersons, who constitute a vast majority of our sporting population. Thus, there is a greater need to investigate the unique ways that men in the athletic world experience their gender role, and the unique ways that they experience and adapt to their male gender role. Understanding the same, will enable practitioners and sports psychologists to develop better training programmes, interventions and support services for the athletes.

2. METHOD

A mixed method study, at its most basic level, combines both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis within a single study.

The research paradigm adopted for the current study will be Social constructivism and interpretivism. According to this worldview, an attempt is made to understand the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their unique experiences. Within the mixed method approach, a sequential explanatory design was adopted for the present study, within which data collection progresses in specific stages.

Two scales were used for the current study, the restrictive emotionality scale (Subscale of the GRC scale) developed by O'Neil and the Perceived stress scale (developed by Sheldon Cohen, 1994).

A google form was constructed after much deliberation about its content and structure which communicated to the participants the requirements for participating in the study, information about the ethics of the study as well as the purpose and objectives.

2.1 Sampling method

Non-probability sampling is when items or elements that are to be included in the sample are deliberately selected by the researcher. (Kothari, 2004).

For the current study, purposive and snowball sampling was utilised, within the non-probability sampling procedures. Purposive sampling technique in which the participants fulfilling the inclusion criteria for research are themselves selected by the researchers. They are selected on the basis of the qualities of the sample that the researcher desires. The inclusion criteria consisted of athletes within the ages of 18-16 years, residing in Delhi-NCR, and currently engaged in at least some form of competitive sports, at the state, regional or national level and had completed at least one academic degree. The education based criteria was kept to enable participants to cognitively understand and respond to the research questions.

Snowball sampling involves building a sample through referrals. At first, an initial respondent is identified and that respondent may be asked to identify others who meet the study criteria. This method does not contribute much to the representativeness of the sample but may ease the process of data collection. (Leary, 2017).

2.2 Procedure

In the study at hand, the first quantitative data is collected through google forms from young men within the age group of 18-26 years who were either enrolled in or had completed at least one academic degree, on the restrictive emotionality subscale of the gender role conflict scale and the perceived stress scale.

On the basis of the quantitative data obtained, top scorers and moderate scorers on the scale of restrictive emotionality were recognized and semi-structured qualitative interviews would be conducted with such participants which constitute Phase – II of the study.

Only the top 5 and bottom 5 scores would be included in phase - II, that is, the qualitative phase of data collection, keeping in mind the aim of the study, as we were interested in the extent to which restrictive emotionality of the participants would be influenced by their ideas of masculinity and the participants who are top and bottom scores would enable the researcher to look at the differences in the ideas of masculinity that these participants have, which is contributing to their widely different scores

After the successful completion of phase - II of the study, the researcher would conduct a detailed thematic analysis to look at the various themes that emerged from the interview pertaining to the participants' ideas of masculinity. The results of both the quantitative and the qualitative stages of the data collection would be triangulated at the stage of interpretation and analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The broad aim of the current study was to understand restrictive emotionality and perceived stress among young Indian males and how this emotional expression is influenced by their ideas of masculinity.

For the purpose of this study, a mixed-method approach to research was adopted, with a sequential exploratory research design, which proceeded in specific steps. Data was collected from men, who fall within the ages of 18-26 years, who were fluent in both Hindi and English and who had completed at least one academic degree. Data collection and analyses proceeded in two stages, a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase. In the first phase of data collection, which was the quantitative phase, the men were required to fill out an online questionnaire, which consisted of the restrictive emotionality scale and the perceived stress scale. After the quantitative phase of data collection was over, and the data was cleaned and entered into SPSS, some 86 responses were finally included in the study.

The recorded demographic details of the participants revealed that some participants fell within the age range of 21-23 years (61.6%), and most of them were graduates (79.1%). When it came to relationship status, most of the participants were single (72.1%).

Through the quantitative analysis, we could see that restrictive emotionality scores had a range between 0-60, it had a mean of 37.24, with a standard deviation of 8.922. This shows that most of the participants displayed more restrictive emotionality.

When it comes to perceived stress, the obtained score falls within the range of 6-38 with a possible obtained range of 0-40, the mean came out to be 22.30 and a standard deviation of 6.702. This shows that most men also experienced more than average stress. The level of

stress experienced by men can also be derived from the scores on the perceived stress scale, which has been developed by Sheldon Cohen, the level of stress experienced can fall within three ranges, zero to thirteen indicates low stress, fourteen to twenty-six indicates moderate stress, twenty-seven to forty indicates a high level of perceived stress. (Cohen, 1983).

Out of the total of 86 participants, nine participants fall within the category of low level of stress, fifty-five participants fall within the category of moderate level of stress and twenty-two participants fall within the category of high level of stress.

TABLE 1
SCORES OF PARTICIPANTS ON RESTRICTIVE EMOTIONALITY AND PERCEIVED STRESS.

Variable	Possible Range	Obtained Range	Mean	Median	SD
Restrictive emotionality	0-60	10-58	37.24	37.50	8.922
Perceived stress	0-40	6-38	22.30	22.00	6.702

To understand the relationship between restrictive emotionality and stress, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for both variables, the correlation coefficient value came out to be .308, which indicates a positive moderate correlation between the two variables. This indicates that as the scores on restrictive emotionality increase, it impacts the amount of stress experienced by males. The scores on restrictive emotionality for all men could be understood in light of the ideas of masculinity that they hold. Table 1, represents the scores of participants on the two scales of restrictive emotionality and stress.

When it comes to the ideas of masculinity, a total of nine major themes emerged from in-depth qualitative interviews with the participants. These themes are detailed below -

TABLE 2
MAJOR THEMES EMERGING FROM THE QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Verbatim from the participants
WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN IN INDIA	-To earn a living and to provide for others -Maintain a standard of behaviour -Being emotionally restrained	<i>"A man has to earn, a man has to make a living for himself"- J.P (21-23 years)</i> <i>"Earn a good amount of money" - A.P (21-23 years)</i>
REASONS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF MASCULINE GENDER ROLES	-Historical, cultural and familial reasons -Lack of Awareness	<i>"We are a patriarchy by default, men used to be providers " - R.S</i> <i>"Family is one perpetuating gender norms in society" - A.P</i>
PERSONAL NEGATIVES OF THE MALE GENDER ROLE	Restraints and burden of responsibility Guilt Settling behaviour	<i>"Men can't cry, openly in society" - J.P</i> <i>"As a result of society's expectation of you, you tend to experience a lot of guilt"</i>
IMPORTANCE OF EXPRESSING EMOTIONS	Feeling better Forming connections and communicating with others	<i>"You are better able to process your emotions"- S.</i> <i>"Expressing emotions are better for our own health"- R.S</i>
BARRIERS TO EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION	Judgment Lack of support and awareness	<i>"There is also a hesitance, to talk about your emotions"-S.S</i> <i>"Some people are not aware enough and there is a hesitate to talk about your emotions" - J.P</i>
STRESSORS	Family stress Career stress	<i>"Earning a good amount of money is important for you " -J.P</i> <i>"The process should be valued over outcome" - S.S</i>
ACHIEVEMENT RELATED PRESSURE IN SPORTS	Financial achievement Nature of achievement Process over outcome Athletic identity	<i>"Earning a good amount of money is important " - J.P</i> <i>"This kind of achievement also leads to competition" - R.S</i> <i>"It is important to make it in this field"</i> <i>"I need to be the best in my field and keep persisting"</i>

As we can see, seven major themes emerged out of in-depth qualitative interviews with participants conducted to understand ideas of masculinity among young Indian male athletes. These seven major themes were - what it means to be a man in India, reasons for the existence of masculine gender roles, personal negatives of the male gender role, the importance of expressing emotions, barriers to emotional expression, stressors and achievement. As we can see a variety of sub-themes also emerged which were explored further with the participants.

As we can see from Figure 1, participants recognized the importance of expressing emotions and could also reflect subjectively where their unique ideas of masculinity come from. Family and cultural values seem to be influencing these participants' own ideas of what it means to be a man in India. More, in-depth research is required to fully understand the process of socialization and how it unfolds within the Indian socio-cultural context.

We can also see through these qualitative interviews that themes such as achievement and financial stability were valued over emotional expression by the participants. This is in confirmation of widely accepted gender norms when it comes to masculinity. This pressure to earn and make a living for themselves could also be understood in light of the male gender role of success, power and competition, which states that men are encouraged to be the breadwinners at home and have the responsibility to be able to provide for others. (O'Neil, 1981).

These pressures can be particularly understood in the context of sports, where there may be unique stressors on the individual such as performing to the best of their capability, of enduring the pressure and to keep persisting. One of the most significant themes to emerge from the current data, was also the theme related to 'athletic identity' which involves identifying as an athlete and giving your best in competitive situations and 'never giving up' come what may. In popular literature, athletic identity refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role and sees sport as central to their self-concept (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). It reflects how strongly an individual defines themselves in terms of athletic participation and performance. This internalisation of this athletic identity, constitutes a significant finding of this study.

4. CONCLUSION

The current study sheds light on important concepts related to athletes such as emotionality, stress and ideas of masculinity that they may have and which influence them significantly. There is a need to study more these dimensions related to athletes who are engaged in competitive sports and ways to foster their growth and resilience.

5. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

- Addis, M. E. (2006).** Ten years of psychological research on men and masculinity in the United States: Dominant methodological trends. Springer Link.
- Bennett, K. M. (2007).** "No sissy stuff": Towards a theory of masculinity and emotional expression in older widowed men. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 21(4), 347–356.
- Bowen, R. A. (2017).** Mixed methods—Theory and practice, sequential, explanatory approach. *International Journal of Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods*, 5(2), 10–21.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2012).** Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper (Ed.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Research designs* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Cleary, A. (2012).** Suicidal action, emotional expression and the performance of masculinities. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(4), 498–505.

- Creswell, J. W. (2013).** Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cusack, D. W. (2006).** Emotional expression, perception of therapy and help-seeking intentions in men attending therapy services. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 7(2), 69–82.
- Levine, C. A., & Kurpius, S. E. R. (1987).** A formulation of Erikson’s theory of ego identity formation. *Developmental Review*, 7(2), 273–281.
- Liaqat, M. A., & Jabeen, F. (2020).** Impact of masculinity and normative male alexithymia on interpersonal difficulties in young adult males. *Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 8(3), 1–21.
- Mahalik, J. R., Locke, B. D., Ludlow, L. H., Diemer, M. A., Scott, R. P., Gottfried, M., & Freitas, G. (2003).** Development of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 4(1), 3–25.
- O’Neil, J. M. (2008).** Summarizing 25 years of research on men’s gender role conflict using the Gender Role Conflict Scale: New research paradigms and clinical implications. American Psychological Association.
- O’Neil, J. M. (2013).** Gender role conflict research 30 years later: An evidence-based diagnostic schema to assess boys and men in counseling. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 91(4), 490–498.
- O’Neil, J. M., Helms, B. J., Gable, R. K., David, L., & Wrightsman, L. S. (1986).** Gender Role Conflict Scale: College men’s fear of femininity. *Sex Roles*, 14(5-6), 335–350.
- Neilson, S. H., & Butcher, F. (2020).** Traditional masculinity ideology, PTSD symptom severity and treatment. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 21(3), 350–359.
- Shek, D. T. L. (2012).** The relationship of racial identity and gender role conflict to self-esteem of Asian American undergraduate men. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(4), 535–543.
- Tajfel, H. (1981).** Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology. Cambridge University Press.
- Tamminen, K. A., Holt, N. L., & Neely, K. C. (2013).** Exploring adversity and the potential for growth among elite female athletes. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 14(1), 28-36.