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Spring 2015

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Recommended Citation

Hoagland, Deanna L. and Levant, Ronald F., "Social Class as a Moderator of the Relationship between Normative Male Alexithymia and Relationship Satisfaction" (2015). *Honors Research Projects*. 51.
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Social Class as a Moderator of the Relationship between Normative Male Alexithymia and

Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Objective: Normative Male Alexithymia (NMA), a gender-linked, mild to moderate inability to verbally express emotions has been negatively linked to lower intimate relationship satisfaction (Karakis & Levant, 2012). The present study investigated the relationship between men's experiences of emotion, couples relationship satisfaction, and social class.

Method: 49 adult males in romantic relationships recruited from the internet provided data on their social class, experience of emotional expression, and relationship satisfaction. *Results:* The first hypothesis, that scores on the Normative Male Alexithymia Scale would negatively and significantly correlate with scores on the Couples Satisfaction Inventory, was supported ($r = -0.504$, $p < .001$); the second hypothesis, that the negative relationship between scores on the NMA and the CSI would be moderated by the social class variables, was not supported. *Conclusion:* Continuing research on issues related to social class and the relationship satisfaction of couples in which male partners suffer from NMA is an imperative task in developing professional, multi-culturally competent psychologists and psychotherapists (Wimer & Levant, 2013)

Key words: Normative Male Alexithymia, relationship satisfaction, social class, men's emotions, couples

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Introduction

Normative Male Alexithymia and Relationship Satisfaction

Gender and social class are intrinsically interwoven constructs, which manifest in societal structures of inequality (Ickes, 1993; Pyke, 1996; Wimer & Levant, 2013). In American society especially, men from lower social class backgrounds face both the disadvantage of being poor and a variety of increased health and social risks (Wimer & Levant, 2013).

One factor associated with increased health risks for men in particular is Normative Male Alexithymia (NMA), a gender-linked, mild to moderate form of alexithymia (Levant et al., 2006). Alexithymia, derived from Greek and Latin roots, literally means “without (*a*) words (*lexus*) for emotions (*thymos*) (Sifneos, 1973 as cited in Levant et al., 2006); clinically, alexithymia describes the inability of an individual to detect emotions in others and to put emotions into words (Levant et al., 2006). Alexithymia appears more frequently among men than women (Levant et al., 2006; Levant, Hall, William, & Hasan, 2009). In a meta-analysis of gender differences in alexithymia (Levant et al., 2009), over 41 studies found that men scored higher, on average, than women on measures of alexithymia. Levant et al. (2009) also saw consistently small mean differences between the genders with substantial overlap between males and females, an effect size which supports theoretical reasoning that symptoms of alexithymia may be exhibited in only a specific subpopulation of men.

The symptoms of NMA are theorized to result from the strong socialization of some boys to conform to traditionally masculine norms (Levant 1992, 1995, 1998 as cited in Levant et al., 2006). In endorsing traditional masculinity ideology, boys are reinforced to internalize a male code that requires them to be independent, competitive, achievement-

oriented, adventurous and risk-seeking “real” men without vulnerability or emotion (Levant, 1996). In this way, boys reared under traditional masculinity ideology are theoretically prohibited from expressing their vulnerable and nurturing emotions and are denied opportunities to develop a vocabulary for and awareness of emotion, emotional empathy and emotional skills (Levant 1992, 1995, 1998 as cited in Levant et al., 2006).

Traditional gender roles may serve an important function in the development of heterosexual relationships in particular, promoting mutual attraction and desirability (Ickes, 1993). However, the endorsement of traditional gender roles may also create miscommunication and dissatisfaction as relationships progress (Ickes, 1993). A fundamental paradox is theorized to exist: despite the societal prescription of traditional gender roles as effective tools for social interaction, the actual functioning of heterosexual relationships in which each partner performs traditionally assigned gender roles is non-optimal and impedes egalitarian progress (Ickes, 1993). Similarly, Burn and Ward (2005) found a negative relationship between men’s conformity to traditional masculine gender roles and romantic relationship satisfaction scores for both men rating themselves and women rating their partners. Interestingly, men’s conformity to traditional masculine norms exerted more influence on women’s satisfaction in the relationship than men’s satisfaction (Burn & Ward, 2005). The researchers Burn and Ward (2005) speculate that this effect is seen because the norms associated with conformity to traditional masculinity-- emotional control, self-reliance, primacy of work, and risk taking-- negatively impact women’s perception of men’s emotional and physical availability within a relationship (Burn & Ward, 2005, pg. 260).

Humphreys, Wood and Parker (2009) assessed the relationship between clinical alexithymia and satisfaction in intimate relationships. They asserted that relationship maintenance behaviors—namely the ability to identify emotions, express these emotions to a

partner, and empathize with the affects of a partner-- are critical to creating and preserving positive relationships but are inconsistent with the characteristics of alexithymia. Humphrey, Wood and Parker's (2009) results suggest that high levels of alexithymia are connected to interpersonal problems and less satisfying interpersonal and sexual relationships. Karakis and Levant (2012) extended this research to examine the association between NMA and relationship satisfaction, fear of intimacy, and communication quality; they concluded that NMA was negatively associated with and relationship satisfaction and communication quality but positively associated with fear of intimacy. Like individuals with clinical alexithymia (Humphreys, Wood & Parker, 2009), men with NMA were less likely to report satisfaction with their current, intimate relationships (Karakis & Levant, 2012).

Social Class and Relationships

The historical view that social class is an objective, hierarchal, or stratified variable was challenged by Liu, Soleck, Hopps, Dunston, and Pickett (2004); instead, Liu et al. (2004) asserted in their social class worldview model (SCWM) that social class is a subjective construct. The researchers (Liu et al., 2014) described social class as consisting of the schemas an individual uses to make sense of the socialization messages and social representations of his or her economic culture. To feel superior or to gain or maintain capital, individuals will engage in classism that produces prejudice and discriminates against individuals of other economic cultures, individuals of their own economic culture, or even their selves (Liu et al., 2004).

Wimer and Levant (2013) argue that the concepts of economic culture, classism, and traditional masculine ideology are intimately linked to each other, and these links aggravate the problems of lower-class men. To explain this, the researchers Wimer & Levant (2013) pointed to the willingness of lower-class men to sanction certain harmful aspects of traditional masculinity ideology, aspects which have not advanced in concert with societal

changes over the past several decades. Take for example, that despite the advent and commonality of two-income households, some men still cling to the “breadwinner” or “good provider” role (Wimer & Levant, 2013). In addition to placing role strain on men, this provider ideal promotes gender inequality as men may justify and rationalize that they make or could make more money and are more committed to making money than their female spouse (Wimer & Levant, 2013).

Research by Pyke (1996) focused on the interaction of social class and masculinity, in both the context of a broader understanding of class and gender relations and a narrower view of the interpersonal dynamics within intimate relationships. She proposed that social class determines how men enact traditional masculinity (Pyke, 1996; Wimer & Levant, 2013). Specifically, Pyke (1996) discussed how hypermasculinity, misogyny and other masculine behaviors may function as compensatory, social strategies for lower-class men subordinated by the ascendant masculinity of higher-class men. Attempting to disguise their subordination, men from lower-class backgrounds may adopt strategies to exhibit masculine characteristics and exert dominance in the power balance of their interpersonal relationships. While men from upper-class backgrounds perform masculinity in ways that enhance, sanction, and mystify their privilege, men from lower-class backgrounds may be propelled to exert masculinity in coercive and even detrimental ways (Pyke, 1996).

Given the integral nature of interpersonal relationships to men’s psychological health (Barnett, Marshall & Pleck, 1991), further research into the relationship between outcomes of traditional masculinity, specifically NMA, relationship quality, and social class is vital. The purpose of the current study was to examine if the relationship between a man’s NMA and his self-reported couples relationship satisfaction is moderated by his social class. The influence of social class on the relationship between NMA and couple’s relationship satisfaction has not been previously studied. The first hypothesis was that scores on the

Normative Male Alexithymia Scale would be negatively correlate with scores on the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI); this would indicate that the higher an individual's level of NMA, the less satisfaction the individual reports in his relationship. The second hypothesis was that the negative relationship between scores on the NMA and the CSI will be moderated by social class. This is, that the slope of the negative relationship between scores on the NMA and the CSI would be greater for men with self-ascribed lower social class than for men with self-ascribed higher social class.

Method

Participants

Adult men in romantic relationships ($N = 49$), were recruited from online community sources via postings on Craigslist sites for various major cities in all regions throughout the United States. Ages ranged from 19 to 79 years ($M = 40.92$, $SD = 15.06$, $median = 36.5$). All participants were involved in a relationship that included being married, partnered, or engaged (75.5%) or dating exclusively (24.5%). Participants were asked to report the length of their current relationships. Overall relationship lengths spanned from 6 months to 61 years ($M = 14.71$, $SD = 15.98$, $median = 5.5$). The majority of participants listed their ethnicity as White/European American (77.6%); some participants reported their ethnicity as Latino/Hispanic (10.2%), Black/African American (6.1%), Asian or Asian American (2.0%), or as other races or ethnicities (4.1%; which includes Middle Eastern and Other: "White/Native American"). Most participants reported that the highest degree of education they had completed was high school/GED (57.1%); 28.6% reported Bachelor's degree and 14.3% reported a Master's degree or higher. The median family/household income was between \$40,001 to \$60,000. Finally, the median self-ascribed social class group was lower-middle class.

Procedures

Participants completed a 56-item survey that included a Demographic Form, the Normative Male Alexithymia Scale (NMAS), and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). The study was completed using an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics survey utility at the participants' convenience. The study was approved by The University of Akron Institutional Review Board. Participants were given the option to enter into a raffle for a \$50 Visa Gift Card as compensation for taking part in the current study.

Measures

Demographic Form. This form, compiled for the current study, assessed: gender (male, female, transgender, or other), age, ethnicity (White/European American, Black/African American, Asian or Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, American Indian, Pacific Islander/Inuit, Middle Eastern, or Other), sexual partner preference (Always female, Usually female, but sometimes male; Equally likely to be either, Usually male, but sometimes female; or Always male), relationship status (Currently married/partnered/engaged, Currently dating exclusively, Currently dating casually, or Currently single), relationship length, highest degree of education completed (High School/G.E.D., Bachelor's (e.g., B.A., B.S.), Master's (e.g., M.A, M.S., M.Ed., M.B.A.), Ed. Specialist (e.g., CAGS, Ed.S, or Doctorate (e.g., Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D, M.D., J.D.)), household income (Under \$20,000, \$20,001-40,000, \$40,001-60,000, \$60,001-80,000, \$80,001-100,000, or Over \$100,000), self-reported social class (Lower Class, Lower Middle Class, Middle Class, Upper Middle Class, or Upper Class), and religion (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Pagan, Agnostic, Atheist, or Other – please specify).

Normative Male Alexithymia Scale (NMAS). The NMAS (Levant et al., 2006) is a 20-item inventory designed to assess Normative Male Alexithymia; participants respond to questions about their experience of emotions using a Likert-based format (1 = *Strongly*

Disagree to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). Sample items include, “I have difficulty expressing my emotional needs to my romantic partner, spouse, or best friend,” and, “I do not see much value in talking about my feelings.” Exploratory factor analysis revealed a single 20-item factor (Levant et al., 2006). Scores on the NMAS demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$ for men) and test-retest reliability ($r = .91$ for men) over a one- to- two month period. The validity of the scale is supported by the results of gender difference analyses, regression analysis of the NMAS above and beyond other instruments, and the scale’s incremental validity in predicting traditional masculine ideology (using the Male Role Norms Inventory). A total NMAS score is obtained by recoding reverse-worded items and then averaging the scores on all 20 items; higher averaged scores indicate greater Normative Male Alexithymia. The coefficient alpha for the present study was .88.

Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). The CSI (16) (Funk & Rogue, 2007) is a 16-item inventory designed to assess current relationship satisfaction. Eight of the items are scored using a 6-point Likert-type format with various response options (5 = *All the time* to 0 = *Never*; 0 = *Not at all True* to 5 = *Completely True*; 0 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Completely*). Sample items include, “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship,” “I really feel like a part of a team with my partner,” and “To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?” Six questions ask participants to rate how they feel about their relationship between two descriptions on a 6-point binary scale (e.g. 5 = *Sturdy* to 0 = *Fragile*). One additional question, “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship,” is scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale (0 = *Extremely Unhappy* to 6 = *Perfect*). Scoring is kept continuous; a total score is found by calculating the summation of scores on all items (a score of 81 indicating the highest possible relationship satisfaction score). Scores on the CSI, in the current study, demonstrated excellent internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .98$). Results of correlational analyses between

the CSI and other measures of relationship satisfaction provide evidence to supporting the strong convergent and construct validity of the CSI (Funk & Rogge, 2007).

Results

Data Cleaning and Missing Data Procedures

The data were thoroughly screened before conducting statistical analyses to ensure the accuracy of the data file. A total of 147 participants began the survey. After eliminating those who did not provide informed consent (1), those who identified their sex as female (5), did not indicate their gender (2), identified as single or dating casually (78), or did not start one or both scales, the final sample included 49 men, for a completion rate of 33.3%. There were missing data points as one participant declined to answer several items on the NMAS. As the NMAS total score was found by taking the mean (using the SPSS MEAN procedure) of the items a participant answered, this participant's total score retained validity. There were also missing data points for the CSI scale as several participants declined to answer, in a discernable pattern, items at the end of the scale. This suggests that participants may have tired or become frustrated at the end of the CSI scale, possibly due to an error in the visual design of the survey. Missing values were handled by using all available information and pairwise deletion.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), alpha coefficients, and bivariate correlations of study variables are presented in Table 1.

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis, that scores on the Normative Male Alexithymia Scale would negatively correlate with scores on the CSI was supported; ($r = -0.504, p < .001$). In two different models, relationship satisfaction was regressed on Normative Male Alexithymia, the three social class variables (highest degree of education, family/household income, and self-

ascribed social class), and the interaction of NMA and the social class variables. The second hypothesis was not supported because the interaction of each social class variable and NMA was not significant. Regression coefficients of study variables are presented in Table 2.

Other Findings

The current study found that family/household income was significantly correlated with participants' highest degree of completed education ($r = .31, p < .05$). Also, participants' self-ascribed social class was significantly correlated with both their highest degree of completed education ($r = .39, p < .01$) and family/household income ($r = .75, p < .01$). These bivariate correlations are also presented in Table 1.

Discussion

Summary and Discussion of Results

The present study investigated the influence of social class on the relationship between men's experiences of emotions and couple's relationship satisfaction. Testing of the first hypothesis found that scores on the NMA significantly correlated with scores on the CSI, suggesting that men with higher degrees of NMA experience less satisfaction in their romantic relationships. This could indicate that men with NMA, who have difficulty identifying and expressing their own emotions, may also experience difficulty engaging in behaviors that help maintain the satisfaction of their relationships.

Testing the second hypothesis found no significant interaction between NMA and any of the variables used to measure social class— highest degree of education completed, household income, and self-ascribed social class— predicted couples relationship satisfaction over and above the effect of NMA or the social class variables alone. This finding implies that men's social class level would not influence the strength of the relationship between men's degrees of NMA and their satisfaction in intimate relationships. This could indicate that the relationship satisfaction of men suffering from NMA did not look significantly

different by level of social class. However, analyses were underpowered by a small sample size, suggesting that the strength of this relationship may have appeared significantly greater for men of lower social class, had the study utilized a larger sample of participants.

A significantly positive relationship was found between all three social class variables. Self-ascribed social class was positively correlated with both participants' highest degree of completed education and family/household income. This suggests that participants' self-ascribed social class, reported as a subjective construct, was positively related to participant's objective social class ratings and accurately reflected the phenomenon of social class in general. This could indicate that measuring an individual's subjective experience of economic culture is an effective way of assessing social class in psychological research, as asserted by Liu et al. (2014).

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

One major limitation of the current study is that all analyses were underpowered by a small sample size. Many eligible participants (being male and in a married/partnered/engaged relationship or dating exclusively) declined to start one or both of the scales and were excluded from data analyses, decreasing the rate of completion and making it difficult to discern significance in all of the analyses conducted. Future research should attempt to replicate the current study utilizing a larger sample size of men.

Future research may also benefit from investigating if sexual orientation influences the possible interaction between social class and NMA on relationship satisfaction. Although past research has focused primarily on the relationship satisfaction of traditionally masculine men suffering from NMA within heterosexual relationships (Burn & Ward, 2005; Humphreys, Wood, & Parker, 2009; Ickes, 1993; Karakis & Levant, 2012; Pyke, 1996; Wimer & Levant, 2013), 11 participants in the current study identified as gay, bisexual, or did not identify a sexual orientation. Due to the small sample size utilized in the study,

supplemental analyses were not performed to explore how the relationships and interactions of the variables may be different for various sexual orientations. Future research could attempt to replicate the current study, specifically recruiting individuals of various sexual orientations.

Another limitation is that the sample utilized in the study was recruited via Craigslist postings. Although postings called for community volunteers from diverse cities in all regions of the United States, the sample recruited for this study was not representative of the population, in general, of the United States. Also, it is possible that participants recruited from online share similar characteristics that decrease the external validity of the study. For example, due to the online nature of the process by which participants were recruited, participants had access to Internet via a computer or mobile device; it is possible that some individuals from lower-social class backgrounds may not have access to these resources and would be unable to access the survey. Alternatively, individuals willing to participate in online research may be different in some way from individuals who would be unwilling to volunteer for psychological research or do not seek such opportunities. Lastly, it is possible that some men chose not to take the survey because they were asked to consider and express their emotions and discuss the nature of their intimate relationships, which are difficult for men with high levels of NMA. Future research could surmount these unique limitations by using a larger variety of sources to recruit participants or by presenting larger incentives to engage individuals who are hesitant to participate.

A final limitation of the study is the self-report nature of the surveys. It is possible that some participants engaged in bias by responding in a socially-desirable way. The CSI inventory is especially open to error due to bias responding; there is potential that requiring men to report the amount of agreement they think exists between their romantic partners and themselves on CSI items does not accurately or wholly portray the satisfaction of their

relationships. Evidence for relationships between the variables in the study would be strengthened if future research employed a multi-method design (including the interviewing method) and also investigated the relationship satisfaction of partners of male participants.

This study initiates research on the influence of social class on the relationship between NMA and couples' relationship satisfaction. Future research might incorporate a larger sample size recruited from a variety of community sources in more regions of the United States, to investigate possible differences in correlation and moderation of relationship satisfaction, NMA, and social class by sexual orientation; and utilize a multi-method design investigating the relationship satisfaction experienced by partners of male participants.

Clinical Implications

Continuing research on issues related to social class and the relationship satisfaction of couples in which male partners suffer from NMA is an imperative task in developing professional, multi-culturally competent psychologists and psychotherapists (Wimer & Levant, 2013). Wimer and Levant (2013) prescribe that mental health and vocational counselors become more informed of the multicultural issues which impact the lives of lower class clients, especially men. They argue that professionals can only offer the most appropriate, beneficial and empathetic counseling for men by understanding the lifestyles, values, and goals of lower-class clients and providing particular attention to the cultivation of client's support systems. Given the importance of interpersonal relationships to men's psychological health (Barnett, Marshall & Pleck, 1991), further research into the relationships between NMA (assessed by employing the 20-item NMAS), relationship quality, and social class is required to contribute to our understanding of the interwoven nature of gender and social class and the ways these constructs contribute to social inequality (Ickes, 1993; Pyke, 1996; Wimer & Levant, 2013).

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Couples Relationship Satisfaction	$\alpha = 0.98$				
2. Normative Male Alexithymia	-0.504**	$\alpha = 0.88$			
3. Social Class: Education	0.23	-0.21	—		
4. Social Class: Household Income	0.12	0.09	0.31*	—	
5. Social Class: Self-Ascribed	0.256	-0.06	0.39**	0.75*	—
<i>M</i>	57.58	3.86	1.69	2.88	2.27
<i>SD</i>	18.88	1.04	1.07	1.6	0.91

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis for Normative Male Alexithymia Scale and Social Class Variables, and their interaction Predicting Couples Satisfaction Index Scores

	Model 1				Model 2			
	b	B	t	p	b	B	t	p
1. NMAS	-8.533	-0.472	-3.288	0.002**	-0.566	-0.031	-0.061	0.952
2. Completed Education	0.999	0.058	0.389	0.699	-2.91	-0.169	-0.193	0.848
3. Household Income	0.179	0.015	0.072	0.943	3.943	0.332	0.401	0.691
4. Subjective Social Class	3.539	0.167	0.773	0.444	16.321	0.772	0.826	0.414
5. NMAS x Completed Education					1.15	0.261	0.296	0.769
6. NMAS x Household Income					-0.778	-0.306	-0.331	0.743
7. NMAS x Subjective Social Class					-3.685	-0.762	-0.715	0.479

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.