

The Impact of Labeling and Gender Stereotypes on Mental Health from a Cross-cultural Perspective

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Abstract. With the development of society and the deepening of scientific research, the wise of mental illness study has expanded from a single genetic dimension to comprehensive sociological considerations, aiming to explore new paths of mental health maintenance and treatment for people. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relevance of labeling theory within the field of mental illness and its impact on individual mental health, which shows that classification refinement helps early identification and intervention. However, it is accompanied by potential risks in applying labeling theory which is the negative stereotypes (e.g., on biological gender, social roles, and social status) and cultural labels may profoundly affect patients' self-cognition. Therefore, it is necessary to act with caution when using labeling theory as the standard during the process of assessment of mental illness, with an emphasis on respect for individual uniqueness and psychological complexity and striving to eliminate the adverse effects of stereotypes. This move is the key significance for optimizing mental illness prevention strategy, which may improve diagnostic accuracy and treatment effectiveness.

Keywords: Labeling theory; gender stereotype; mental health; cross-culture study.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century today with the advancement of economics, science, and technology, people are no longer satisfied with material wealth but have begun to explore spirit and pursue mental health. As the French philosopher Descartes said, "Cogito, ergo sum." It suggests that everything around every individual may be defined as illusory, and only when the individuals start to think about themselves is the symbol of their lives and existences. So, when self-cognition and self-awareness are strong enough, it often means that stability is based on personal mental health. According to this, individuals derive labels in the process of seeking self-definition and form subjective self-awareness in a classified way.

Labeling theory has a template effect on individual mental health assessment and lowers the threshold of self-cognition and understanding in personal psychological wellness. However, based on the results of related studies, it has been suggested that the application of labels may easily lead to stereotypes and hurt individual psychological conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to find a way of using labeling theory prudently, respecting individual differences, and reducing the potential harm of stereotypes to optimize the scientific and effectiveness of mental health assessment [1].

Based on the premise of respecting the independence and complexity of individuals, it is important to understand the different backgrounds of individuals (e.g., social status) when exploring the field of mental health. Among all of them, the influence of the cultural background of each individual has played a crucial role in shaping consciousness, thus simply affecting the formation of self-cognition. According to the results of related research, Eastern and Western cultures have different preferences for social structures (e.g., Eastern culture tends to follow collectivism and Western culture tends to follow individualism) [2]. Therefore, cross-cultural context research may have a significant impact on the field of mental health analysis and exploration. Moreover, the awakening of gender has increasingly become the focus of public attention, advocating that individuals should transcend gender stereotypes and be regarded as independent subjects. However, the potential harm of gender stereotypes to mental health cannot be ignored, such as the burden of family responsibilities imposed on women and the strong image that men must show, so mental illnesses caused by this are common.

An in-depth analysis of the construction mechanism of gender labels and accompanying negative effects on mental health is not only crucial for the field of psychological wellness research field, but also contains huge exploration value and potential, aiming to promote the comprehensive development of mental health and the true realization of gender equality.

2. Interaction between Labeling and Different Cultures

2.1. Overview Introduction of Labeling Theory and Mental Illness

Labeling theory, the sociological framework as the table of contents, helps individuals focus on how to identify or label based on their behaviors. As a theory that was initially implemented in the sociology field to study how social structure and interaction shape human behaviors, labeling theory aims to explore the formation and development changes that may occur when individuals are included in labeled groups.

Labeling theory was expanded from a sociological perspective to the professional field of mental illness as a research direction that brought significant attention to the role of social factors in understanding mental illness. Labeling theory emphasizes how social perceptions, stigmas, and interactions of people contribute to the ways individuals experience and manage mental illness, which shows the correlation between social environment and mental health [1]. However, although mental illness has been defined as a treatable condition today, the sufferers are still bonded with negative labels (e.g., weak, aggressive, insanity) and even face discrimination that some of the recovered patients receive unjust treatment upon reentering society because of their record of mental illness. For instance, a patient with severe bipolar disorder who has already been cured still has a high risk that being rejected by the department he or she applied because of the worry about a relapse of the disorder. This discrimination behavior occurs because bipolar disorder is frequently associated with the stigma of emotional instability. Thus, the department's senior management may avoid hiring the former patient since they are concerned about their emotional stability and job performance though they have been deemed cured.

Patients who suffer from mental illness always exhibit behaviors that challenge public perceptions. Such behavior may often lead to negative labeling that in turn reinforces stereotypes about mental illness. This phenomenon suggests the concept of deviant behavior as described in labeling theory, which was defined by Howard S. Becker who advancing labeling theory, declares that deviant behavior should not be solely attributed to an individual's transgression of a particular social norm, but rather arises from a distinctive characteristic imparted by a particular social group or identity. In other words, when an individual's behavior is inconsistent with public cognition that could be defined as deviant behavior, regardless of whether such behavior involves moral or legal standards [1]. Although "deviant behavior" itself is determined as neutral, it inadvertently exacerbates the negative stereotypes associated with mental illness. Moreover, based on the formal definition provided by Becker, the occurrence of deviant behavior is closely associated with the formation of stereotypes. Consequently, the application of labeling theory in the field of mental illness research may subtly accelerate the development of stereotypes about mental illness.

2.2. Impact of Different Cultures on Labeling Theory

Under the influence of different cultural backgrounds, the definition of deviant behavior may show the varies. Based on labeling theory, suggests that behavior that violates social norms is the result of acquired construction. In other words, the special cultural background of an individual plays a central role in shaping his or her cognition of deviant behavior. So that, this cultural influence leads to differences in the tendency of people from different kinds of cultural backgrounds to label certain groups and causes a bias in the understanding of deviant behavior across cultural contexts. In brief, it is important to analyze and understand the cultural background environment in which the research individuals are located to comprehend the application of labeling theory fully.

Take Western and Eastern cultures as examples, they tend to have shaped quite different understandings and applications in various ways, especially in how they define deviant behavior and assign labels [2]. For instance, the role of females is often more conservative and traditional in Eastern culture compared with Western cultures in the impression of gender. If a woman behaves in a non-traditional way (e.g., pursuing a career or getting pregnant before marriage), she is more likely to be labeled negatively. On the contrary, the same kinds of behaviors are more inclined to be regarded as normal and not classified as deviant in some progressive cultures. Therefore, there is no concern that they will catalyze labeling women.

2.3. Impact of Culture on Mental Health or Illness

The introduction of deviance theory has opened up an innovative and alternative academic path for exploring the field of mental illness [3]. The new path has significantly promoted the integration of the sociological analysis framework with the perceptive of cultural background research and shows the evidence that it associates with the mental illness field closely. Specifically, the theory asserts that the differential tolerance degrees for deviant behaviors under different cultures profoundly affect how different groups understand the label of mental illness and related concepts [3]. This includes but is not limited to, differences in the understanding of diagnostic criteria for a disease, the acceptance of treatment methods, and the expectations and biases society holds toward patient groups.

Based on an interpretation of culture relativists, the explanation of mental illness cannot be separated from the social and cultural context of the individual [4]. However, with the advancement of social civilization, people have regarded mental illness as a type of treatable disease and included it in the medical field. The cultural shaping of individuals by different backgrounds still affects people's attitudes towards mental illness. It even leads to differences in the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment methods in different cultures. Chittaranjan's paper which analyzes the relationship between Indian culture and its influences on local mental illness situations [4], he points out that there are 70% to 80% of rural mental illness patients are more tend to seek help from religious healing centers rather than psychiatric hospitals commonly known in another cultural context in local. The tendency stems from their religious beliefs, which leads them to view mental illness as caused by supernatural forces and requiring spiritual intervention for resolution. This phenomenon not only reflects the power of belief but also highlights the significant role of culture in shaping an individual's understanding of mental illness, and shows its indispensable influence on how mental illness and health are perceived and interpreted.

3. Cross-culture Comparison: Impact of Labeling and Stereotype on Mental Health

To understand the causes and treatment of mental illness, it is necessary to integrate cultural resources and social structure for analysis. By comparing different attitudes of Western and non-Western cultures towards mental illness, there is a clearer reveal of the logic and influence behind it. Here are the detailed compassions of attitudes to mental health under two different cultural backgrounds.

3.1. Mental Health under Western Cultures

Based on the fact that most Western countries are taking individualism as their criterion and establishing social structures mostly dominated by it, individuals who live under such cultural backgrounds are more likely to prioritize his or her rights over the collective and focus on personal achievements. Undoubtedly, this fundamental idea leads to cognitive differences between cultures of non-western countries.

Under Western cultures, analyses of mental health tend to focus on the individual level instead of focusing on the group's interest. In other words, Individual psychological well-being is prioritized over altering oneself to promote collective harmony. The influence of individualism makes the mental

health problems caused by loneliness in Western countries far greater than those in collectivist culture countries, and the lack of a sense of community belonging has become a potential trigger for this problem. The cause of this social atmosphere can be traced back to the influence of the Enlightenment on Western society, which brought scientism and materialism while emphasizing the importance of individual rights and freedoms. So that it leads to an increase in loneliness and thus impairing mental health directly or indirectly because of the weakened sense of community. According to clinical knowledge, social support is essential to ensure people's psychological well-being. Thus, the lack of interpersonal connections may be the main cause of mental illness in Western culture society [5].

3.2. Mental Health under Non-Western Cultures

Compared to Western cultural countries, many non-Western cultures, especially Eastern cultures, tend to take collectivism as their guidelines, which emphasizes group harmony, common interest, and social responsibility. People who live in this kind of cultural context are often required to hide their behavior or desire which may violate collective interests to ensure the harmony of group thought. Although it ensures community to a certain extent, but also carries the potential risk to mental health which may be caused by suppressing the self.

Simultaneously, most non-western cultural countries have not been influenced by scientific thought and materialism because they have not been influenced by the Enlightenment. It has led to some cultures being more dependent on their cultural beliefs while showing a preference for collectivism. Collectivism defaults to a holistic view and a spirit of dedication, which may coincide with the concepts espoused by religious belief systems. Therefore, people in some non-western countries with religious beliefs are more inclined to attribute mental health problems to the supernatural realm and seek treatment in the spiritual realm. For instance, most Indonesians believe that mental illness is related to demonic possession and decide to seek help to treat patients from Pesantren (a traditional Islamic boarding school that provides religious and general education) rather than from a psychiatric hospital for exorcism. Under the influence of religious beliefs, this non-general scientific treatment is very effective in the region [6].

However, the belief that there is a relationship between mental illness and supernatural factors (e.g., possession) is viewed negatively in most Western cultures compared to non-western cultures. Through interviews with two groups of people from Eastern and Western cultural contexts, the study found that individuals from Eastern cultural backgrounds significantly showed more superstitious tendencies. The result has explained why people in Eastern cultures have significantly higher recognition and efficacy of religious and spiritual therapies than in Western cultures [7]. Therefore, the study reveals the important role culture plays in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness.

Today, Asian countries (e.g., China, South Korea, and Japan, etc.) have significantly reduced their traditional association with mental health problems and supernatural forces after experiencing a profound baptism of materialism and scientific thinking. However, the increase in suicide and crime rates still highlights the seriousness of current mental health problems which is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored through modernization. Changes in family structure have become one of the factors that cannot be ignored and may be one of the causes. The continued rise in divorce rates in many Asian countries is not only a direct reflection of changes in personal relationships but also a strong signal of the impact on family stability [8]. As the basic unit of the whole society, the weakening or disintegration of the family's functions will undoubtedly have a profound potential impact on the mental health of its members. Also, with the acceleration of urbanization and industrialization, although it has greatly promoted economic development, the negative effects have been brought to the family system. This process not only changed people's living environment and livelihood but also reshaped people's daily life patterns and interpersonal networks, which increases people's life pressure invisibly. In such a fast-paced life, individuals are often prone to challenges and confusion from cultural adaptation, identity recognition, etc., which in turn breeds inner anxiety and turmoil.

4. Causes and Influences: Combined Influences of Gender Stereotypes, Labeling, and Culture

4.1. Relationship between Gender Stereotype and Mental Health

The differences between men and women have been emphasized since ancient times for so long. It is acknowledged that both men and women do have a bunch of differences when they are defined as biological sex. For instance, the male group has average stronger muscle strength and explosive power than women. In contrast, the female group is born with stronger agility and flexibility, proving they are less vulnerable to injury than men. However, these true traits have been invisibly magnified into an impression of people to define different genders, thus forming stereotypes against binary gender groups. The phenomenon may not only lose the comprehensiveness of analysis of psychological gender diversity, but its existence as a stereotype inadvertently affects the formation of male and female as gender labels, which the solidification of stereotypes, which in turn limits the realization of personal potential and the exploration of self-identity and affects mental health.

The formation of gender stereotypes is mainly due to social expectations of men's and women's roles, which are partly due to biological differences (e.g., men are physically stronger; women are more delicate). Thus, men are often expected to take on responsibilities, and power and focus on tasks, while women are closely associated with family stability and social relationships. This gender stereotype is subtly reflected in the daily behaviors of individuals. For example, according to the research, American women do about one hour more housework than their husbands on average [9]. On the contrary, men are more likely to be seen as the breadwinners and are expected to contribute to the family from the outside. This phenomenon exemplifies differences in embodied gender identity and family roles. When such a family role is solidified as a template of gender responsibilities in general social cognition, any individual behavior that deviates from this template may be judged as "abnormal" by the public, regardless of male or female. Thus, gender labels have triggered a series of self-contradictions in individuals. For example, a woman who shows ambition or desire directly in the workplace will be highly possibly be seen as a violation of gender labels. In the same way, if a man refuses to pursue achievement in his career but focuses on the family, such as becoming a househusband, he will be accused of failing to fulfill the role that men should play in society and will be negatively judged by society.

As gender labels gradually deepen stereotypes have gradually deepened stereotypes, and caused those unproven stereotypes to begin to become the basis for people to judge whether a person conforms to the current gender role. Take the "masculinity" in the male gender label as an example. This male gender label has almost become the standard for measuring men's social credit. In other words, society uses the label to judge whether men can behave in a way that meets expectations in various social situations [10]. Nevertheless, the label of masculinity is more likely to represent a hegemonic idea of gender opposition and male dominance over the opposite sex. The view tends to suggest that rather than viewing the male gender as equal to the female gender, the existence of masculinity is more like a symbol that makes men superior to women. Thus, denying a male individual's male identity is often described as feminine and carries a negative connection with it. Masculinity emphasizes the physical strength of males, and muscular men are considered more powerful. However, this is contrary to the emphasis of masculinity on "not paying attention to appearance", because behaviors that show care about physical image are feminine or effeminate and do not meet the requirement of masculinity. The incompatibility of these two ideas is highly likely to cause male individuals to be confused and lost in self-cognition, thus questioning their self-identity and laying potential risks to their mental health. In addition, the expression of masculinity emphasizes drinking culture. There is no doubt that alcohol, as an inhibitor to neurons, excessive drinking is probable to damage brain nerves and produce irreversible negative effects, thus posing a threat to the mental health of men.

4.2. Cultural Construction of Gendered Mental Health Labels

With the advancement of time, even though the status of men and women has begun to become equal today, the stereotypes about the two that are contained in gender labels under the influence of the general cultural background are still spreading.

As mentioned above, the gender label of the female is often tied to housekeeping and being virtuous. Although insufficient scientific evidence supports the idea that women must be gentle and considerate, the image has gradually become solidified as a model female character and even derived into cultural works. For example, female characters are often portrayed as humble and submissive in the highly praised early British and American literature [11]. Those characters tend to be classified into the image as conventional, conservative, or secular. To a certain extent, it may be due to the historical fact that most of the writers who were able to publish their writing works successfully and spread to the public at that time were men. The majority of authors may analyze female characters from an extremely male gaze, making them accessories or some kind of reward after the male protagonist completes the storyline. With the enduring influence of these literary works, the understanding of early gender labels has been biased.

Like the label of masculinity may have potentially negative effects on defining male identity, the subjective self-identification and awareness of women as real human beings are constantly diluted and simplified under the influence of the female label shaped by cultural information. Thus, the definition of the female label starts to move to the extreme. In some early famous early cultural works, the image of women was simply divided into two categories: saints and sluts. The image of a female character in the category of Saint is often defined as pure, noble, and self-sacrificing, emphasizing the noble female image in the minds of men. Moreover, some emphasize the attributes of a good wife who is frugal and manages households, such as showing exquisite cooking skills in the plot of the work or playing a secondary role in social occasions to highlight the style of her husband, which highlights the harmony and happiness of the family.

In contrast, female characters in the category of “slut” are mostly defined as showing behaviors that violate the characteristics of a “saint”. For instance, refusing marriage, showing ambition to surpass male leaders in the workplace, or having romantic relationships with more than one male character even that happened in the past tense. Those female characters mostly existed independently, in other words, they were characters that existed outside the stereotype of women being tied to the family which represents a rebellion against the social perception of the label of a perfect female image. Therefore, those behaviors they have shown are often defined as a signal of deviant behaviors and could not end well compared to other saint-category female characters in the cultural works. This idea may subtly deepen the stereotypes about the good or evil perspectives of female individuals. Meanwhile, this phenomenon could also deepen the doubts of female individuals about their self-cognition, which in turn aggravated their inner struggles and quietly planted the seeds of potential threats to mental health.

Little girls are instilled with the idea of having a perfect wedding and becoming a nice wife and mother, playing house with dolls; boys are taught to be strong and reliable to make achievements in their careers instead of caring about family affairs. Under the influences of such cultural symbols, female individuals may more likely tend to suppress their self-expression and choose to compromise, which leads to a higher risk of mental illness for women than for men. According to a report by the World Health Organization in 2009, an average of 73 million women in the world may experience a major depressive episode each year [12]. The female identity that bonds to family noun and responsibility forces them to give up parts of themselves, such as personal hobbies and the pursuit of dreams, to devote themselves to the household and conform to the current label of female standards. Such gender stereotype deprives them of their free will as human beings, causing people's repressed true emotions to swell and eventually develop into mental illness.

5. Suggestions for Reducing the Negative Effects of Stereotypes and Labeling on Mental Health under Different Cultural Backgrounds

To eliminate the potential negative impacts of various stereotypes, the priority might be to popularize cultural education and expand the knowledge of individuals to the maximum degree so that the public has a more comprehensive understanding of different labels.

First of all, according to the discussion of the above research and studies, the establishment of self-cognition will greatly affect mental health. Therefore, it is a feasible method to educate individuals about the cultural background of their region, which tends to help people build a more complete cultural identity [12]. Given that social and cultural identity is often closely related to the establishment of social relationships and given that a sense of community belonging is crucial for maintaining individual mental health, the establishment and improvement of social and cultural identity tends to ensure the stability of an individual's mental state. So, education popularization, especially multicultural and cross-cultural education, going to help individuals better understand the values and norms of different cultures. Meanwhile, the popularization of cross-cultural education is going to help people from different cultural backgrounds to eliminate their prejudices against the characteristics of a culture to a great extent, thus deepening the understanding between people and contributing to building closer and more harmonious social relations. It allows individuals to apply knowledge related to their cultural backgrounds to more flexibly construct and express their own cultural identity, thereby effectively reducing related mental health problems caused by cultural misunderstanding or labeling.

The differences that hide behind labels cannot be ignored in the process of treatment in the mental illness area. Taking the treatment object as an independent individual with unique development experiences and background is the premise of psychotherapy intervention. Though the treatment individual may show that some of the behavior frequency meets the diagnostic criteria of a certain mental illness label in the measurement table, it is not advisable to make an affirmatory conclusion based on these standards. Both cultural background and gender should be taken into consideration in the diagnosis process of mental illness. The formation of cultural identity is not limited to the degree of understanding and recognition of an individual's cultural contents but also involves the social groups, values, beliefs, and customs to which one belongs [13]. Therefore, patients should be considered based on their cultural background and actual cognition during the treatment process. The therapist needs to have no subjective assumptions to see whether potential patients' behavior is in line with their social background or community and whether it will be judged as deviant behavior in their cultural field. According to this premise, the patient's behavior can be evaluated, diagnosed, and treated comprehensively and accurately.

Gender differences and labels are necessary to be considered during the process of helping individuals to maintain mental health. Given the impact of biological gender differences and gender labels on individual self-cognition, treatment methods should fully consider and utilize these differences and use them as a starting point for communication with patients. According to recent research results, male and female individuals have slightly different tendencies when they are choosing psychological intervention methods. For example, most women may tend to be more inclined to seek emotional support and empathy to pursue a better psychological experience, while men may emphasize practical methods of solving problems and pay more attention to external performance [13]. Hence, due to the different emphasis on the needs of male and female patients, the evaluation process has to be differentiated and carried out based on considering gender differences into consideration rather than generalizing.

Exploring gender labels and sociocultural labels can help people prevent mental illness in advance and treat it more efficiently. The interaction of cross-cultural research and gender labeling research may give people new possibilities to explore the triggers of mental illness. Based on the different expectations of male and female roles in different cultures or social constrictions (e.g., patriarchal society and matriarchal clan), the gender stereotypes given are also different. This may lead to variations in the causes of mental illness between men and women across different cultural

backgrounds. So, interventions for mental illness need to take into account gender, culture, and social factors. Treatments that consider both fields, will be more effective to help patients recover their mental health.

6. Conclusion

The application of labeling theory in the field of psychological health has undoubtedly helped people who diagnose any mental illness, which makes the process of diagnosis more efficient and accurate. At the same time, it has lowered the potential threshold for people who do not have a professional academic background in abnormal psychology to understand clinical field knowledge and evaluate their mental conditions. It allows individuals to better understand their mental conditions and thus establish a more complete self-awareness.

However, the process of applying labels carries an inherent risk of oversimplifying individual complexity, which may contribute to the formation of stereotypes and potentially lead to the development of new mental health challenges. To eliminate this kind of risk as much as possible, the complexity and independence of individuals should be considered. Therefore, in contemporary society, the cultural background and gender labels of individuals have emerged as significant social determinants of the mental health field in addition to biological factors. A deep understanding of the individual's socially constructed identity within their special cultural context is essential for developing effective and appropriate treatment strategies, particularly in clinical psychology.

The formation of gender stereotypes is influenced by the individual's cultural background, which makes studies of these two fields have shown a high degree of interactivity and overlap. In the diagnosis and treatment of individuals with mental illness, it is essential to minimize diagnostic bias stemming from subjective gender stereotypes. Moreover, it is important to consider the individual's cultural and social background's definition of gender labels and their recognition and understanding of the cultural context when making a diagnosis. The finding could adequately account for the potential influence of gender labels on mental health and develop a perfect diagnostic and treatment plan. Based on ensuring full objectivity, it is key to strive to express the deepest respect for patients with mental illness and provide the most effective treatment methods to promote their full recovery.

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