Introduction

Sex differences in pain are well documented. One of the potential factors that may explain such differences is gender role. Gender role refers to the culturally and socially constructed meanings that describe what is appropriate behaviour for men and women (Unger 1990) and it has been identified as a factor that influences pain sensitivity response between the sexes (Fillingim et al., 2009). The male gender role (masculinity) is stereotypically that of stoicism whereas the female gender role (femininity) is stereotypically that of increased sensitivity (Sanford et al. 2002)

Aim

The aim of this systematic review with meta-analysis was to investigating the correlation between gender role measured in a self report instrument and experimental pain measurements.

Methods

Studies were sought by searching computerised databases (Fig.1). The search used the keywords: gender role OR femininity OR masculinity OR sex differences OR gender differences AND Pain (title and abstract). Studies were included if a relationship between gender role and experimental pain measurement was present.

Results

The results of our meta-analysis showed that only 2 studies in which GREP was used to measure gender role reported correlations between gender role and pain threshold. The resulted pooled correlation (r=0.38 p<0.001) showed a medium effect of GREP on pain threshold.

Two studies found significant correlations between masculine traits and pain tolerance. The resulted pooled correlation was 0.38, p=0.019 indicates a medium effect on pain tolerance.

The resulted pooled correlation from 7 studies that found significant correlations between femininity or vulnerability scales and pain tolerance was -0.33, p<0.0001 indicating a medium effect of femininity or vulnerable traits on pain tolerance.

Conclusion

We found that the effect size of gender role was medium on both pain threshold and pain tolerance. Femininity or vulnerability traits negatively correlated with pain tolerance and masculinity positively correlated with pain tolerance. Our findings emphasize the psychosocial gender theory view as men expected to deny and tolerate pain more than women.

References

4. Unger, 1990.: Psychology and the construction of gender (pp.102-149)