Is Menopause Depressing? An Investigation of Three Perspectives

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This study examines three perspectives in the literature about menopausal depression. According to one, the physiological changes of menopause result in increased psychological distress. Another approach proposes that menopause is most depressing for women who occupy traditional female gender roles. The third asserts that menopause is not especially depressing for most women. This study empirically examines three perspectives using data from two community surveys. These analyses suggest menopausal status may not be associated with depressive symptomatology, either directly or indirectly through traditional gender roles.

In recent years a substantial body of research has been directed toward discovering the determinants of women's psychological well-being and distress (e.g., Belle, 1982; Brown & Harris, 1978; Guttentag, Salasin, & Belle, 1980; Weissman & Paykel, 1974). Some of this work attempts to explain why women are more likely than men to exhibit symptoms of depression and general psychological malaise (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1976, 1977; Gove & Tudor, 1973, 1977; Radloff, 1975; Weissman & Klerman, 1977). One issue in the literature concerns the relative contribution of biological processes to women's high risk for such psychological disorders. An aspect of women's biology that has often been implicated in negative psychological outcomes is menopause. This study examines the relationship between menopause and depressive symptomatology.

1This research was supported in part by PHS grant numbers 5T32MH13043, 5T32MH16373, and 5T32MH15774. I appreciate the helpful comments I received from Janet Berkeley, Bruce Link, and an anonymous reviewer on earlier versions of this paper. I also am grateful to Lenore Radloff and NIMH for providing the CMHA data and to Harold Dupuy and NCHS for the HANES data.
The experience of menopause is shaped by a complex content that is historically, sociologically, and culturally specific. It is also shaped by individual psychological and physiological conditions. While this complexity is often acknowledged in the literature, studies tend to focus on specific aspects of menopause that are thought to be psychologically distressing. The purpose of this paper is to outline three of the major perspectives in the literature and to empirically examine hypotheses that derive from them. The first perspective asserts that the physiological changes of menopause are psychologically stressful. Another proposes that the specific life conditions of midlife, when combined with the experience of menopause, can induce psychological difficulties. The third view claims that menopause is not especially distressing for most women. I briefly review the arguments embodied by these perspectives and then consider how well each is supported empirically.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The menopause, which occurs around age 50 (MacMahon & Worcester, 1966), refers to the permanent cessation of menstruation. It entails a variety of physiological changes, among which the decline in estrogen production and shifting hormonal balances are the biological processes most often cited as psychologically stressful (e.g., Achte, 1970; Utian, 1976). According to some researchers, the link between bodily change and distress is a direct one. For example, Wilson (1966) claims that menopause is an ovarian deficiency disease, one symptom of which is “menopausal negativism.” This is manifested in the “transformation, within a few years, of a formerly pleasant, energetic woman into a dull-minded but sharp-tongued caricature of her former self” (Wilson, 1966, p. 97). In a similar vein, Kopera (1973) lists the emotional consequences of hormonal changes, which include “diminished energy or drive, reduced powers of concentration and academic performance, irritability, aggressiveness, nervous exhaustion, fluctuation in mood, tension, depression, introversion, sense of internal frustration and inadequacy, intolerance of loneliness, marital troubles, and antisocial behavior patterns” (Kopera, 1973, p. 124).

A second position in the literature assumes that menopause will be most distressing under specified social, psychological, or cultural conditions. Some claim that the negative cultural meaning of menopause in contemporary Western society accounts for the menopausal distress of many women (Newman, 1976). According to this view, since menopause symbolizes the loss of valued feminine attributes, such as sexuality, fertility, attractiveness, and youth, it will be most stressful for women who strongly identify with