Changes in the prevalence of symptoms of depression and depression across Greece

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Summary. This paper reports on the regional prevalence of symptoms of depression and clinical depression (current major depressive episodes) in Greece in the years 1978 and 1984. Prevalence rates were estimated from two extensive, nationwide cross-sectional home surveys on psychosocial issues and health, carried out in four geographical areas: the Greater Athens area, the Greater Thessaloniki area, the rest of the urban areas and rural areas. The methodology used, the sampling procedure and the screening instrument (The Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale) were the same in both surveys. Within the 6-year period a substantial increase in the prevalence of symptoms of depression in all geographic areas was observed, with the Athenian respondents expressing a higher number of symptoms of depression than their counterparts from the other areas. The prevalence of current major depressive episodes, according to specific criteria matched with criteria from the DSM III R, was increased in 1984 in Athens and in the rural areas only. We suggest that economic instability between 1978 and 1984 probably contributed to the changes in the rates of depressive disorders.
depressive illness and that there is a modest relationship between the self-reported symptoms of depression and the diagnosis of depression (Roberts and Vernon 1983; Boyd et al. 1982). The detection of major depressive episodes in the general population is made possible by the application of a specific methodology.

The purpose of this paper was to answer the following questions:

- Were there any differences in the prevalence rates of symptoms of depression between 1979 and 1984?
- Were there any differences in the regional distribution of the prevalence rates of depressive symptomatology?
- What were the predictors of depressed mood?
- Were there any differences in the prevalence of major depressive episodes during the 6-year period (1978–1984) with respect to sex and regionalization?

Method

Design

Both surveys were cross-sectional. The first (study A) was carried out by the National Center for Social Research over a 6-month period in 1978 and the second (study B) by the Department of Psychiatry of Athens University over a 4-month period in 1984 (Madianos et al. 1987). Both samples were four stage systematic; the first comprised 4083 persons aged 18–64 years, and the second comprised 4292 respondents aged 12–17 years and 18–64 years. For purposes of comparability the group aged 12–17 years in the second survey was excluded, so that both survey samples included adults only. Both samples were drawn randomly from four geographic areas including Greater Athens, Greater Thessaloniki, rest of urban areas (15 cities) and semi-urban-rural areas (40 communities). The total population covered in both surveys was 9,130,000. The samples represented the whole of mainland Greece with the exception of the Aegean and Ionian islands (4.5% of the total population), which were not covered by the sample for technical reasons. The sampling procedure was four stage systematic, including at the first and second stages, the random selection of the town location and the household block and at the third and fourth stages, the random selection of a household from the listings of the existing households in the block and finally, the selection of the individual respondent to be interviewed at random using the Kish selection grid (Kish 1965).

The sociodemographic characteristics of both survey sample respondents are presented in Table 1. The data presented include the percentages of the actual numbers of persons surveyed by sex, age groups, years of schooling, socioeconomic status, marital status, employment, and place of residence. The slightly higher number of females compared to males in both sample corresponds to the general population ratios. Regarding the other variables, no differences were observed except for the unemployment rates. In the 1978 sample only 1.2% were unemployed, while the proportion of unemployed respondents in 1984 reached 4.6%.

A pilot study preceded the main surveys in order to test the validity of the research instruments. The respondents in both surveys were interviewed in their homes by trained interviewers, the majority of whom participated in both surveys. The duration of the interview ranged from 60 to 90 min. The overall response rate for the total sample in the 1978 survey was 92% and in the 1984 survey, 96.5%. Thirty percent of the interviews were checked, mainly by a second visit or telephone contact.

Questionnaires

The interviews in both surveys were conducted using a structured questionnaire, aimed at obtaining data on physical and mental health, suicidal behaviour and related psychosocial issues (i.e. help-seeking patterns, drug and alcohol use, and family medical history). Sociodemographic data were also obtained. The mental health status of the respondent was assessed by the use of the CES-D and the Langner scales (Radloff 1977; Langner 1962), standardized for the Greek population (Madianos et al. 1983; Madianos 1984).

Measures of depressive disorders

The prevalence of depressive symptomatology was assessed by the use of the CES-D scale developed by the Center for Epidemiological Studies, National Institute of