Gender Differences in Rates of Depressive Symptoms Among Low-Income, Urban, African American Youth: A Test of Two Mediational Hypotheses

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The present study tested for gender differences in depressive symptoms in a sample of 622 low-income, urban, African American adolescents. Results indicate that adolescent girls in this sample were significantly more likely to endorse depressive symptoms than were boys. To examine possible explanations for this gender difference, 2 variables were tested as mediators of the relation between gender and depressive symptoms: (1) interpersonal stressors and (2) ruminative coping. Results indicate that ruminative coping, but not interpersonal stressors, mediated the relation between gender and depressive symptoms in this sample. Possible explanations for these findings, in light of the common and unique experiences of low-income, urban youth of color, are explored.

KEY WORDS: African American; urban; adolescents; gender; depression.

One of the most consistent findings in developmental psychopathology is that adolescent girls are significantly more likely than adolescent boys to experience depressive symptoms (Compas and Hammen, 1997; Ge et al., 2003; Hankin and Abramson, 2001). Most studies indicate no emotional, and academic distress, the relationships among early learning problems, behavioral disorders, and social skills deficits, and the efficacy of social skills training programs for students with learning disabilities.  

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of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Petersen et al., 1991a,b).

In spite of the consistency with which gender differences in rates of depression have been reported, the degree to which this pattern holds true for adolescents of diverse backgrounds is less clear, as the bulk of the research in this area has focused on predominantly White, middle-class samples (Ge et al., 2003; Grant et al., 1999). In particular, little is known about the relation between gender and depression among low-income, urban youth of color (Ge et al., 2003; Grant et al., 1999).

Gender and Depression in Low-Income, Urban, African American Youth

Research investigating gender and depression among low-income, urban, African American youth is important as there is growing evidence that this population is at increased risk for a range of stressful life experiences that place them at heightened risk for psychological distress (DuRant et al., 1994; Mcloyd, 1998; Moses, 1999). Poverty rates for African American youth are two and a half times those for European American youth with approximately 31% of African American children and adolescents living in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). Further, disadvantaged African American youth are more likely to live in persistent poverty and to live in the most isolated urban neighborhoods (Gottschalk et al., 1994; Huston et al., 1994).

Much of the research on psychological symptoms affecting low-income, urban youth has focused on externalizing outcomes (Guerra et al., 1995; Mason et al., 1994; Tolan and Henry, 1996); less is known about internalizing symptoms such as depression (Brown et al., 1995; Fitzpatrick and Boldizar, 1995). Research on gender differences in depression among low-income, urban youth of color has been scant, and results have been mixed (Garrison et al., 1989; Kagawa-Singer et al., 1996; Sagrestano et al., 2003). However, there is some evidence that the gender differences reported in the broader adolescent population hold true for African American, low-income, urban youth. For example, Grant et al. (in press) found that girls reported significantly higher rates of anxious-depressed symptoms relative to male peers in a sample of low-income, urban, predominantly African American adolescents. Additional research, building on these preliminary findings, is needed to understand the mediating processes that may account for a relation between gender and depression in this population. The present study was designed to address this research goal.

Explanations for Gender Differences in Rates of Depression

Most explanatory models for the emergence of gender differences in depression include both diathesis and stress components (e.g., Cyranowski et al., 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema and Girgus, 1994). For example, Hankin and Abramson (2001) have proposed an elaborated cognitive vulnerability–transactional stress theory, which includes both negative events and cognitive vulnerability as proposed mediating mechanisms of the relation between gender and depressive symptoms. According to this theory, preexisting vulnerabilities (genetics, personality, environmental adversity) set the stage for both negative events and cognitive vulnerabilities. Negative events contribute to depressed mood, which interacts with cognitive vulnerability to predict depression (Hankin and Abramson, 2001).

Although Hankin and Abramson’s (2001) model has yet to be tested in full, a few studies have examined specific examples of the primary mediating mechanisms. In particular, interpersonal stressors represent a life events variable that has received considerable theoretical attention (and more limited empirical attention) as a mediator of the relation between gender and depression. In addition, ruminative coping represents a cognitive vulnerability variable that has been hypothesized to explain gender differences in depression. In a landmark study of predominantly European American and middle-class 25- to 75-year-old adults, Nolen-Hoeksema et al. (1999) found that both chronic interpersonal stressors and ruminative coping accounted for gender differences in depressive symptoms.

Interpersonal Stressors

It has been hypothesized that women’s greater reliance on and responsibility for interpersonal relationships may play a role in their higher incidence of depression (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999). According to this hypothesis, women are socialized to (1) be more sensitive to the needs of others, (2) invest more time and energy in the problems and lives of friends and family, and (3) base their self-esteem on the status of relationships with others (Boggiano and Barrett, 1991; Kaplan, 1986; Robbins and Tanck, 1991). Thus, women are exposed to heightened rates of stressors in the lives of significant others (Kaplan, 1986; Kessler and McLeod, 1984) and more likely to experience distress in response to interpersonal difficulties (Boggiano and Barrett, 1991; Robbins and Tanck, 1991). Consistent with this hypothesis, empirical evidence suggests that, although men and women report equal rates of