



Does self-competence predict gender differences in adolescent depression and anxiety?

CHRISTINE MCCAULEY OHANNESSIAN, RICHARD M. LERNER, JACQUELINE V. LERNER
AND ALEXANDER VON EYE

This longitudinal study examined 75 young adolescents to explore whether self-competence predicts the emergence of gender differences in depression and anxiety. During both 6th and 7th grade, boys reported significantly higher levels of self-competence than did girls. In addition, boys were significantly less depressed and anxious than girls in 7th grade, but not in 6th grade. Finally, when the variance contributed by self-competence was accounted for, the relationship between gender and trait anxiety weakened and the relationship between gender and depression became non-significant. These results support the hypothesis that self-competence is partially responsible for the emergence of gender differences in depression and anxiety during early adolescence.

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Introduction

A vast literature has demonstrated that the prevalence of emotional problems, particularly depression and anxiety, rises dramatically during adolescence (Compas *et al.*, 1993; Lewinsohn *et al.*, 1994). Therefore, it is not surprising that many adolescents experience symptoms of depression. While the majority of adolescents cannot be diagnosed as being clinically depressed (about 3–9% experience severe depression; Brooks-Gunn and Petersen, 1991; Stewart *et al.*, 1994), many studies have indicated that approximately one-third of adolescents experience mild to moderate depressive symptoms (Compas *et al.*, 1993; Stewart *et al.*, 1994).

Compared to depression, the examination of adolescent anxiety has been relatively neglected. This is unfortunate since recent research (cf., Kashani and Orvaschel, 1990) has indicated that anxiety may be even more common than depression during adolescence. In addition, similar to depression, it is clear that the experience of anxiety increases during adolescence (Clark *et al.*, 1994; Ebata *et al.*, 1990). Conservative prevalence estimates indicate that about 16% of young adolescents (12-year-olds), 17% of middle adolescents (14–16-year-olds), and 21% of late adolescents (17-year-olds) meet the criteria necessary to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (Kashani and Orvaschel, 1990). Importantly, a larger majority of adolescents experience mild to moderate levels of anxiety which also may negatively affect their development (Ohanessian *et al.*, 1996).

Adolescent emotional problems and psychosocial adjustment

Since many adolescents experience symptoms of depression and anxiety, it is critical that more research be conducted examining the causes and consequences of these emotional

Reprint requests and correspondence should be addressed to C. McCauley Ohanessian, Department of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Medical School, 263, Farmington Avenue, Farmington, CT 06030-2103, U.S.A.

problems. It is apparent that both depression and anxiety have implications for immediate and long-term psychosocial functioning. For example, adolescent depression and anxiety have been found to be related to academic problems, social problems, delinquency, substance abuse, and eating disorders during adolescence (Lehman, 1985; Kandel and Davies, 1986; Strauss *et al.*, 1988). Moreover, emotional problems during adolescence (particularly depression) have been found to be significantly associated with adolescent suicide (Simons and Murphy, 1985; Buie and Maltsberger, 1989).

The experience of emotional problems during adolescence also has been linked to problems occurring during adulthood. This primarily appears to be due to the fact that emotional problems that emerge during adolescence tend to persist into adulthood (Weissman *et al.*, 1985; Ebata *et al.*, 1990). Therefore, it is not surprising that many adolescents who experience emotional problems are more likely to have psychosocial difficulties during adulthood, including marital problems, work-related problems, and substance abuse (Kandel and Davies, 1986).

Gender differences in depression and anxiety

The implications of emotional problems are especially pertinent to adolescent girls since a wealth of research has demonstrated that they are at a much greater risk for experiencing depression and anxiety than are adolescent boys. In fact, many studies have indicated that adolescent girls are at least twice as likely to develop clinical depression and anxiety disorders in comparison to adolescent boys (Kashani *et al.*, 1989; Cohen *et al.*, 1993). Adolescent girls also have been found to be significantly more likely to experience low and moderate levels of depression and anxiety than adolescent boys (Allgood-Merten *et al.*, 1990; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Ohannessian *et al.*, 1996). Since emotional problems that develop during adolescence tend to persist into adulthood, it is not surprising that this gender difference similarly continues throughout adulthood, with women remaining twice as likely to experience emotional problems than men (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990).

When do gender differences emerge? What is most intriguing about the gender difference in emotional problems is that it is absent during childhood (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990; Brooks-Gunn and Petersen, 1991; Cohen *et al.*, 1993).¹ One important question, therefore, is when do these gender differences emerge? Presently, the answer to this question is unclear. Most of the research within this area conducted to date has focused on middle-to-late adolescents. Research focusing on these age groups has consistently demonstrated that adolescent girls are more likely to experience depression and anxiety (symptomatology and clinical disorders) than are adolescent boys (*cf.*, Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Petersen *et al.*, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994). It is important to note, however, that some studies examining younger adolescents (11–12-year-olds) have found the same pattern of results, indicating that even early adolescent females may be more at-risk for depression and anxiety than early adolescent males (Kandel and Davies, 1986; Ohannessian *et al.*, 1996). These latter studies point to the critical need to assess youngsters as early as late childhood to determine when this gender difference consistently emerges.

¹The majority of studies have not found significant differences in reported levels of anxiety and depression during childhood. However, when differences have been reported, boys have been found to be more likely to exhibit emotional problems than girls (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994).

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