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Depressive symptoms as a function of sex-role, rumination, and neuroticism

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Abstract

The current study examined the relations between biological sex, socialized masculinity, rumination, neuroticism, and depressive symptoms in a large sample of young adults ($N = 589$). As hypothesized, socialized masculinity negatively predicted rumination, neuroticism, and depression even when biological sex was controlled. Structural equation modeling revealed that rumination-on-sadness predicted neuroticism and depression, whereas rumination-in-general predicted only neuroticism. Controlling for masculinity, rumination, and neuroticism, men were more likely to experience depressive symptoms than were women.

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1. Introduction

Research has consistently found rumination to be a predictor of depressive episodes. Individuals who ruminate in response to negative emotions experience more depressive symptoms, more depressive incidences, greater risk for future depressive episodes, and longer durations of depression than do those who tend not to ruminate (Matheson & Anisman, 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991; Spasojevic & Alloy, 2001). This relationship has also been found in clinical

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populations (Lam, Smith, Checkley, Rijdsdijk, & Sham, 2003). Other studies have found that ruminative responses predict duration of depression even when initial severity of depression is controlled (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994).

Ruminative responses consist of persistent thoughts that focus attention on depressive symptoms and possible causes. These thoughts are not goal directed and do not lead to plans to alleviate symptoms or causes of depression (Conway, Csank, Holm, & Blake, 2000). Rumination appears to affect depressive mood by interfering with attention and concentration, enhancing recall of negative events, and increasing use of depressive explanations for events (see Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999).

Studies show that women are more likely than men to engage in ruminative responses to negative events (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994), which parallels the long-held observation that women are approximately twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with depressive disorders and report greater depressive symptoms (McGrath, Keita, Strickland, & Russo, 1990). Research using a multiple regression approach has shown that once rumination is controlled, sex differences in depression are no longer significant (Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993). However, research has yet to fully explore the processes that foster this sex difference in rumination. A better understanding of the nature of sex differences in rumination may help shed light on women's greater risk for depression.

1.1. Socialized masculinity

Some theorize that socialization to conform to sex-role stereotypes might play a part in the development of a ruminative response style. Many socialized male sex-roles emphasize instrumental qualities such as confidence and persistence—characteristics inconsistent with a passive, ruminative response (Ruble, Greulich, Pomerantz, & Gochberg, 1993). The stereotype that men are more instrumental than women is already well-known by children in early elementary school (Ruble et al., 1993). To the degree that these beliefs are integrated into one's self image, socialized feminine sex-role beliefs (or, more precisely, lack of socialized masculine sex-role beliefs) could increase vulnerability for a ruminative response style and depressive symptoms regardless of biological sex.

In contrast to masculine stereotypes, several feminine stereotypes involve the experience of negative emotions. Women are thought to be inherently more expressive of sadness and fear than are men (Brody & Hall, 1993), and even preschoolers believe that boys are less likely than girls to feel sad (Birnbaum, 1983). Thus, as sadness is believed to be less “natural” in boys, boys may tend to receive more encouragement to utilize instrumental responses to alleviate any sadness. However, as sadness is believed to be more “natural” in girls, girls may be less likely to receive such encouragement, which may leave them more vulnerable to rumination.

Several studies have shown that identification with socialized masculine traits, commonly defined as instrumentality or agency (Spence, Helmreich, & Strapp, 1974), is negatively correlated with depression in both sexes (Petersen, Sarigiani, & Kennedy, 1991). This negative relationship has also been found in children and adolescents (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Craighead & Green, 1989), with level of instrumentality shown to be a better predictor of depressive symptoms than several other variables, including hormonal changes (Allgood-Merten et al., 1990; Eccles et al., 1988; Petersen et al., 1991).

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