THE ROLES OF SEX, GENDER, AND COPING IN ADOLESCENT DEPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the roles of coping and masculinity in higher rates of depressive symptoms among adolescent girls, as compared to boys. A model was designed and tested through path analysis, which involved the variables of sex, gender, problem-focused coping, rumination, and distraction. The Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale and the Bem Sex Role Inventory, as well as a measure of coping with general stressors was completed by 246 adolescents. Results showed that adolescent girls were more depressed than boys, and that girls used more emotion-focused and ruminative coping than did boys. Greater degrees of ruminative coping were related to high levels of depressive symptoms. Problem-focused and distractive coping were positively correlated with masculinity and negatively associated with depression. Surprisingly, girls were more likely to use problem-focused coping. Problem-focused and distractive coping were found to mediate the negative relationship between masculinity and depression.

There is increasing evidence that female adolescents and adults are more likely than their male peers to become depressed, both clinically and subclinically (Baron & Campbell, 1993; Kashani et al., 1987; Petersen, Sarigiani, & Kennedy, 1991; Weissman, 1987). Further, the association between stress and depression has been found to be more prominent in adolescent girls than in adolescent boys (Ge et al., 1994; Rubin et al., 1992). Nolen-Hoeksema (1994) has suggested that one factor contributing to adolescent girls’ increased vulnerability to depression is how they cope with stress. It may be that girls and boys tend to cope differently, and that the girls’ coping styles place them more at risk for experiencing depression.

There is evidence in the coping literature that men are more likely to use problem-focused coping (thoughts/action initiated to deal di-
rectly with the stressor) and that women are more likely to use emotion-focused coping (thoughts/actions initiated to deal with one's emotions associated with the stressor) (Brems & Johnson, 1989; Stone & Neale, 1984). Problem-focused coping is related to lower levels of depressive symptoms, whereas emotion-focused coping is associated with higher degrees of depressive symptoms (Compas, Malcarne, & Fondacaro, 1988; Ebata & Moos, 1991).

Rumination and distraction are two types of emotion-focused coping. Nolen-Hoeksema (1994) proposed that women are more likely to engage in ruminative coping strategies than are men. Ruminating is thinking or worrying about a problem repeatedly in order to manage one's feelings associated with the stressor. This type of strategy is more likely to maintain depressive symptoms than the more active, emotionally distractive coping techniques that men tend to utilize, such as exercising.

In addition to these coping variables, the variable of gender (operationalized here as sex role) is of importance because several studies have found a negative relationship between masculinity and depression in adolescents (Allgood-Merten, Lewinsohn, & Hops, 1990; Wilson & Cairns, 1988). Further, Nolen-Hoeksema (1994) suggested that the ruminative and distractive coping response sets might be a result of socialization processes that contribute to gender stereotypes.

**Hypotheses**

A model was designed and tested through path analysis (see Figure 1). It proposed the following:

1. Biological sex predicts level of masculine and feminine traits, and to a small degree predicts depression (positively for adolescent girls and negatively for adolescent boys).

2. Masculinity is positively associated with problem-focused and distractive coping, and negatively related to ruminative coping.

3. Problem-focused and distractive coping relate negatively to degree of depressive symptoms, whereas ruminative coping relates positively to depression.

4. Masculinity is directly and negatively associated with depression to a relatively small degree, but not over and above the larger, indirect effect through coping; in fact, coping style is expected to mediate the relationship between masculinity and depression.
METHOD

Participants
A total of 246 adolescents, ranging in age from 14 to 18 years, participated in this study. All were students (9th through 12th grades) attending four public schools and one private girls' school in a metropolitan area.

Materials
The adolescents completed the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS; Reynolds, 1987) as a measure of depressive symptoms;
the short form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1979), assessing degree of masculine and feminine traits, and one measure of coping, assessing emotion-focused, problem-focused, ruminative, and distractive coping with regard to general stressors. Since there are no measures that specifically assess these types of coping in adolescents with regard to general stressors, scales for these four styles of coping were devised from the long form of the Adolescent Coping Scale (ACS; Freydenberg & Lewis, 1993), which lists a total of 79 coping strategies.

Two raters coded the ACS into the four coping scales. Interrater agreement ranged from 88.7% to 91.4%. Alpha reliability coefficients for each of the scales were as follows: .84 for the emotion-focused scale, .81 for the problem-focused scale, .80 for the ruminative coping scale, and .70 for the distractive coping scale.

Procedure

The questionnaire packets were distributed to the students to fill out during one class period (the school administration decided on the classes). Participation was voluntary, and the students and their parents or guardians had given consent. Students who scored high on the RADS were flagged for consideration by the school psychologist.

RESULTS

Findings showed that, as expected, girls were more depressed than boys (girls' $M = 56.41$, $SD = 27.39$, $n = 159$; boys' $M = 44.76$, $SD = 26.74$, $n = 83$), $t(240) = 3.17$, $p = .002$, with an effect size (Cohen's $d$) of .43). Also, as predicted, masculinity correlated negatively with level of depressive symptoms; however, the correlation coefficient was small ($r = -.137$, $n = 242$, $p = .034$). Further, as expected, degree of femininity was not related to level of depressive symptoms.

Figure 2 displays the results of the path analysis. The variables of ruminative coping, distractive coping, sex, and problem-focused coping (in descending order of influence) were significant predictors of depression, accounting for 36% of the variance in degree of depressive symptoms. In addition, both problem-focused and distractive coping (but not ruminative coping) were mediators of the relationship between masculinity and depression (comparing the full model to a nonmediated model without the coping variables, masculinity was a significant negative predictor of depression only in the nonmediated model). Further, because sex did not predict distractive coping and predicted problem-focused coping in the opposite direction of what was expected, the
Figure 2. Results of the Path Analysis

![Path Analysis Diagram]

Note. Parentheses indicate a nonsignificant path. Sex was coded 0 for female and 1 for male.

Variables of problem-focused and distractive coping did not help explain why girls were more depressed than boys. However, girls were more likely than boys to use ruminative coping. Further, ruminative coping was strongly related to depression. This suggests that, in part, girls may be more depressed than boys because of their increased likelihood to cope with stressors by ruminating.
DISCUSSION

This model suggests that being female, using a high degree of rumi-
native coping, and using a low degree of distractive and problem-
focused coping place one at greatest risk for depression. The model also
implies that possessing a lower degree of masculine traits places one
more at risk for depression. This is in large part due to the likelihood
that those lower in masculinity will use less distractive and problem-
focused coping than those higher in masculinity. The findings have
implications for designing preventive interventions to teach adoles-
cents more effective ways of coping with stressors.

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