

WHAT DO WE KNOW (AND NOT KNOW) ABOUT THE GENDER DIFFERENCE IN DEPRESSION IN OLD AGE?

Joan Girgus

Princeton University

Kaite Yang

Stockton University

Christine Ferri

Stockton University

National Academy of Sciences Workshop on “Women’s Mental Health
across the Life Course through a Sex-Gender Lens”

March 7, 2018



BACKGROUND

- It is well-known and well-documented that, beginning in early adolescence and continuing at least through middle-age, females have approximately twice as many depressive symptoms and diagnosed depressive episodes as males.
- Historically, there hasn't been much data about gender differences in depression in the elderly, and what little data there are have been mixed.
- Indeed, less than three years ago, Kaite Yang and I wrote in an article in Current Opinion in Psychology that there is “a remarkable lack of clarity about whether the gender difference continues throughout the life span or declines beginning at age 55 or 65 or even later.”

WHAT WE DID AND WHAT WE FOUND

- We set out to review the data in the literature about the gender difference in depression in the elderly and found 85 articles in three databases that met the following three criteria:
 - Empirical research with both male and female participants, published in peer-reviewed journals;
 - Participants aged 60 and above or aged 50 and above with a mean age of at least 70; and
 - Statistical comparison of female and male unipolar depressive symptoms or diagnoses.
- 72% of these articles reported research done in the last 10 years so there has clearly been an upsurge in studies of depression in the elderly in recent years.

WHAT THE DATA SHOW

- 81% of the studies reviewed showed either that elderly women scored significantly higher than elderly men on dimensional measures of depressive symptoms or had significantly higher rates of diagnosed unipolar depression.
- These studies included participants from 34 countries and every continent except Antarctica; thus, the gender difference in depression would appear to be a worldwide phenomenon.
- Population samples predominated in the studies reviewed, with relatively little dependence on convenience samples.
- Thus, the basic finding that elderly women experience significantly more depressive symptoms and episodes than elderly men can be considered well-established.

WHAT THE DATA DON'T SHOW

- The studies we found did not provide good data about whether the magnitude of the gender difference in depression was similar for adults over age 60 and adults younger than age 60, nor whether the magnitude of the gender difference was similar for older adults (between the ages of 60 and 80) and very old adults (older than 80).
- We know very little about what causes the gender difference in depression in the elderly or whether those causes are similar to or different from the causes at earlier life stages.
- Nonetheless, we reviewed the available data on whether variables that are established contributors to the gender difference in depression at earlier life stages also contribute to the gender difference in depression in old age, and/or whether there are new variables that arise in old age that might contribute to the gender difference in depression in that life stage.

DO VARIABLES THAT PREDICT THE GENDER DIFFERENCE PRIOR TO OLD AGE ALSO PREDICT THE GENDER DIFFERENCE IN OLD AGE?

- Negative Life Events: It is not clear whether elderly women experience more negative life events than elderly men much less whether there is a gender difference in negative life events that predicts the gender difference in depression.
- Coping Styles: The gender difference in rumination is well-established at all life stages, including the elderly, and the gender difference in rumination contributes to the gender difference in depression from adolescence through middle-age. There are fewer data on whether rumination contributes to the gender difference in depression in old age, but what data there are suggest that rumination continues to contribute throughout the life span.
- Interpersonal Orientation (Sociotropy/Dependency). These variables have not been explored as possible contributors to the gender difference in depression in the elderly despite the fact that there are solid data on their contribution to the gender difference at younger ages.
- Social Support: The many different ways of defining and measuring social support make the data on this variable difficult to summarize. Since social support is generally seen as buffering against depression, it seems plausible that the absence of social support predicts depression. However, there is significant evidence that elderly women have higher rates of social contact, support, and participation and more extensive social networks, than elderly men.

ARE THERE NEW VARIABLES THAT ARISE OR INCREASE IN OLD AGE AND PREDICT THE GENDER DIFFERENCE IN DEPRESSION?

- Widowhood/Living Alone: Marital status and living arrangements are the most studied psychosocial variables in the literature on depression in the elderly. Although elderly women are less likely to be married, and more likely to be widowed, than elderly men, there doesn't seem to be a gender difference in depression between women and men who are widowed, divorced, or separated. While more elderly women live alone than elderly men, elderly men who lived alone have more depressive symptoms than elderly women who live alone.
- Poor Health/Chronic Illness: In general, elderly women have poorer health and more chronic conditions than elderly men. There are almost no studies, however, that have asked whether this gender difference predicts the gender difference in depression.
- Financial Strain/Poverty: There are very few studies that have asked whether elderly women are more likely to be poor than elderly men, although those few consistently show such a gender difference. However, there are no studies that have asked whether a gender difference in poverty in old age predicts the gender difference in depression in old age.
- Caregiving: It seems likely that female caregivers of the elderly have higher rates of depressive symptoms than male caregivers. However, the data include caregivers of all ages so we don't know whether this holds true when elderly caregivers are examined as a separate group, and we consequently don't know whether caregiving predicts the gender difference in depression in the elderly.

NEXT STEPS

- Given what we know and don't know about the gender difference in depression in the elderly, and about what causes this gender difference, here are the next research questions we might want to explore:
 - Is the magnitude of the gender difference in depression in the “young-old” (ages 60-80) similar to the magnitude in the “old-old” (ages 80-100) -- and to the magnitude of the gender difference in adolescents and adults?
 - Do the variables that have been found to contribute to the gender difference in depression in adolescents and adults, such as negative life events, coping styles and interpersonal orientation, also contribute to the gender difference in the elderly?
 - Are there new variables – particularly stressors such as living alone, poor health, financial strain, and caregiving – that increase in old age and contribute to the gender difference in the elderly but do not contribute to the gender difference in adolescents and adults?

FINALLY

- It turns out that we know more about the gender difference in depression in the elderly than we thought we did.
- At the same time, there is still a great deal to learn.
- As a closing word, I want to emphasize that there are three questions that must be answered in any study designed to examine whether a particular variable contributes causally to the gender difference in depression.
 - Is there a gender diff in depression in the group being studied?
 - Is there a gender diff in the hypothesized contributing variable?
 - Is there a clear predictive relationship between the gender difference in the hypothesized contributing variable and the gender difference in depression?

A CONCLUDING NOTE

- References for the data summaries presented in this talk can be found in:

Girgus, J. S., Yang, K, and Ferri, C. V. The gender difference in depression: Are elderly women at greater risk for depression than elderly men? (2017). [Geriatrics](#), 2, 35. doi:10.3390.

www.mdpi.com/journal/geriatrics.