

Psychological Medicine

MONOGRAPH SUPPLEMENT 7

Sex differences in minor
psychiatric morbidity
Rachel Jenkins

Cambridge University Press

Sex differences in minor psychiatric morbidity

The question of whether individual differences can be accounted for in terms of heredity or environment forms the essence of the nature–nurture controversy, and has recurred in academic debates throughout history. This monograph provides a detailed review of sex differences in minor psychiatric morbidity, and the theories which might explain them, and it describes the first careful epidemiological study of adult men and women of similar age, educational background, job status and content, occupational attitudes and social environment.

The literature review demonstrates that a female excess in the prevalence of minor psychiatric morbidity is found in most of the treatment statistics, although not all, and in some community studies, with several important and notable exceptions. Furthermore, surveys of school-children and university students do not usually reveal a higher rate of minor psychiatric morbidity in females. Any coherent theory of sex differences must, therefore, take these findings into account.

The study provides an assessment of whether there are sex differences in the constitutional vulnerability of men and women to minor psychiatric morbidity by using a methodological design to minimize the effects of environment, sex roles and stereotypes, and observer and response bias. The study confirmed that there was no sex difference in the prevalence or outcome of minor psychiatric morbidity in such a homogeneous, employed population. This finding indicates that where sex differences are commonly found, they are unlikely to be caused by constitutional differences, but rather by differences in the social environment and social roles of men and women.

This monograph provides an illustration of the major contribution of epidemiological method to the assessment of potential aetiological factors in mental illness and it demonstrates the particular advantages of homogeneous populations for studies of sex differences.

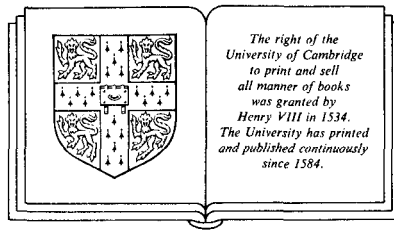
89097-78

Psychological Medicine

Rachel Jenkins

Sex differences in minor psychiatric morbidity

MONOGRAPH SUPPLEMENT 7



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

PUBLISHED BY
THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
32 East 57th Street, New York, N.Y. 10022, U.S.A.
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1985

Printed in Great Britain at the University Press, Cambridge

CONTENTS

Synopsis	<i>page</i> 1
Introduction	3
The evidence	4
Explanations of reported sex differences	8
Method	16
The overall design of the study	16
Description of the population	17
Study procedure	17
Method of data analysis	21
Results	24
Response rates	24
Comparison of non-respondents with respondents	24
Assessment of homogeneity	24
Validation of the GHQ	27
Testing Hypothesis (1)	29
Testing Hypothesis (2)	32
Discussion	36
Introduction	36
Examination of the methodological validity of the study	36
Implications of the data for the hypotheses	38
Conclusions and implications for future research	44
List of tables	47
References	49

This study was designed and carried out between 1979 and 1982 while the author was a research worker linked to the General Practice Research Unit of the Institute of Psychiatry, London, and supported by a Wellcome Trust Fellowship. I am immensely indebted to the Unit's Director, Professor Michael Shepherd, for his encouragement and for the helpful criticism he gave during the course of the work and the preparation of this manuscript.

I am grateful to the Civil Service Medical Advisory Service, the Home Office Establishment, the Staff Society and the individual executive officers without whose wholehearted cooperation the study would not have been possible. Special thanks are due to Mr Paul Taylor, Dr Ruth Lloyd Thomas and the late Mr Brian Morgan for their advice and practical assistance in carrying out a research study within the Home Office.

I received helpful advice during the conception of the study on the measurement of sickness absence from Dr Peter Taylor, Dr Stuart Pocock and particularly from Dr Nigel Nicholson who spared the time for several meetings to discuss the problems associated with the measurement of occupational attitudes and sickness absence.

I owe much to my colleagues at the Institute of Psychiatry. Dr Graham Dunn and Dr David Hand gave extensive statistical advice on the analysis of the data. Professor Anthony Clare, Dr Anthony Mann and Dr Paul Williams co-rated the verbatim scripts of the clinical interviews. Dr Alastair Macdonald, Miss Joanna Murray, Dr Graham Dunn and Professor Anthony Clare gave generously of their time to read, discuss and criticize the various drafts of this manuscript.

I would also like to thank Miss Gill Andrews who typed the monograph.

The study formed the basis of a dissertation submitted in April 1983 for the degree of Doctor of Medicine, University of Cambridge.