

Age and Gender Effects on Non-Suicidal Self-Injury, and their Interplay with Psychological Distress

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Background

NSSI (non-suicidal self-injury) is an important public health issue, with high prevalence and associations with future mental illness and suicide. To date, no large single study has tested age and gender effects on NSSI and their interplay with psychological distress.

Methods

NSSI and psychological distress were ascertained by questionnaire in a community study of 2368 young people aged 14-25; proportions at each age and of each gender were approximately equal.

Results

There was a significant effect of age and gender on the last month NSSI prevalence, best described as a quadratic age x gender interaction ($p = 0.025$): NSSI was more common in females ages 16-19, but there were no significant gender differences at younger/older ages (Figure 1). General distress partially mediated the effects of age and gender on NSSI. The association between general distress and NSSI was not significantly moderated by age, gender nor their interactions.

Figure 3. Mediation by general distress on the association between age/gender and NSSI. Note: (r indicates direct effect, r' indirect effect).

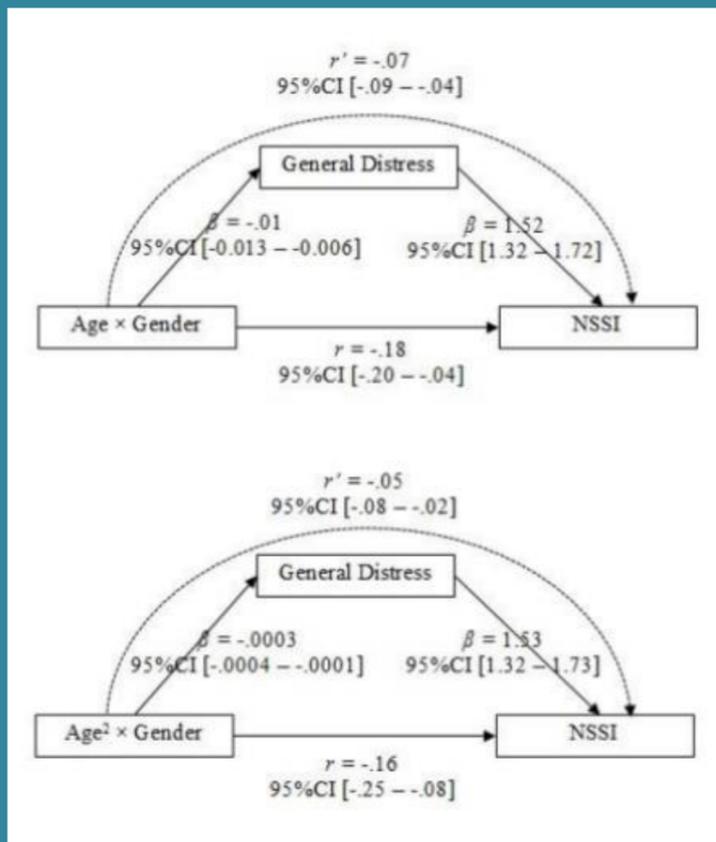


Figure 1. Percentage of Participants with Past Month Non-Suicidal Self-Injury, by Age and Gender

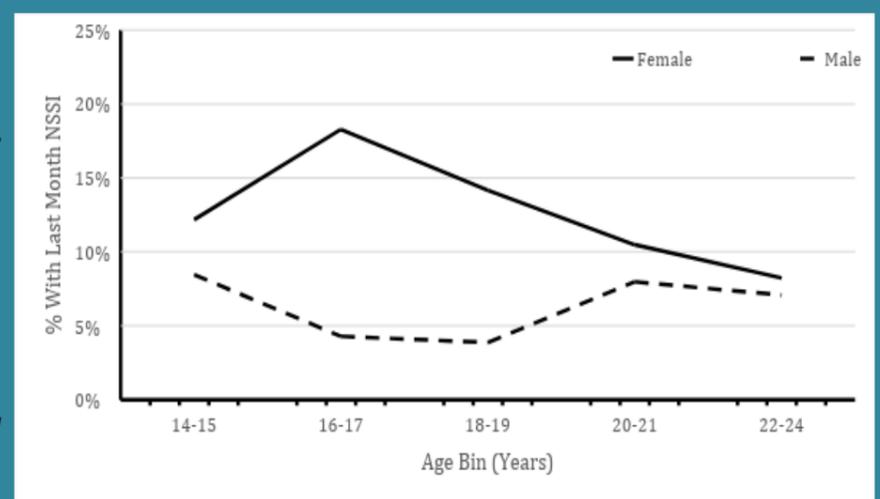
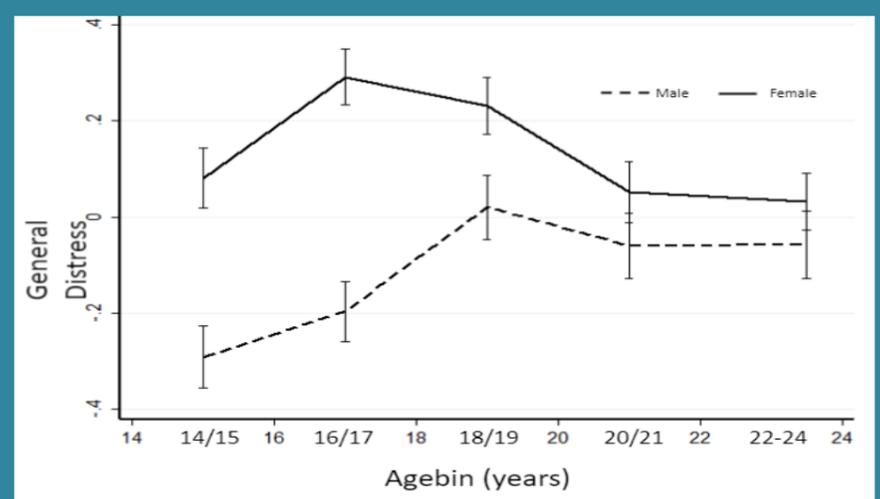


Figure 2. Mean General Distress, by Age and Gender



Discussion

Gender difference in NSSI is not a static gap, but evolves across time, widening in mid-adolescence and disappearing by early adulthood. Part of the reason for that gender gap being present at those ages is the increase levels of distress in young women at those ages. There was no evidence that the effects of general distress on NSSI differed by age/gender. The study was cross-sectional, meaning conclusions about directionality (in particular for mediation) need to be tentative: NSSI may cause distress rather than vice-versa.