



Brief report

DSM-IV 12-month and lifetime major depressive disorder and romantic relationships among African Americans

Robert Joseph Taylor^{a,b,*}, David H. Chae^c, Linda M. Chatters^{a,b}, Karen D. Lincoln^d, Edna Brown^e^a School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States^b Program for Research on Black Americans, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States^c School of Public Health, Emory University, United States^d School of Social Work, University of Southern California, United States^e Department of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Connecticut, United States

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ABSTRACT

Background: This brief report examines the association between marital and relationship status and 12-month and lifetime prevalence of major depressive disorder (MDD) among African Americans. Previous work has found that adults with major depressive disorder are less likely to be married or in a cohabiting relationship. This report extends previous research by investigating whether unmarried, non-cohabiting African Americans with depression are also less likely to be involved in a romantic relationship.

Methods: Data are from the African American sub-sample ($n=3570$) of the National Survey of American Life (NSAL; 2001–2003). The DSM-IV World Mental Health Composite International Diagnostic Interview was used to assess 12-month and lifetime MDD. Weighted logistic regression was used.

Results: The findings indicate that for both 12-month and lifetime major depressive disorder, African Americans who are depressed are not only less likely to be married; they are also significantly less likely to be involved in a romantic relationship. This is particularly the case for 12-month depression.

Limitations: Due to limitations in the number of cohabiting respondents, currently married and cohabiting respondents were combined into a single category.

Conclusion: The findings of this brief report highlight the importance of changes in marital and relationship circumstances of the U.S. population for research and practice on depression and other psychiatric disorders. Our study provides evidence for a more nuanced approach in which examining marital and romantic relationship status together promotes a better understanding of the impact of major depression on romantic unions.

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1. Introduction

The percentage of married adults in the United States has decreased dramatically over the past four decades. The decline in marriage has been particularly pronounced among African Americans (Harknett and McLanahan, 2004). African Americans are less likely than whites to be married or remarried, and are more likely to be separated, divorced and widowed (Taylor et al., 1997). Consequently, African Americans spend less time in marriage than Whites. However, this lower rate of marriage does not mean that they are not involved in romantic relationships. For instance, Tucker and Taylor (1989) found that four out of 10 unmarried African American adults, and about half of those under 55 were

involved in non-cohabiting romantic relationships. In the National Survey of American Life, 22.7% of African Americans were in a romantic relationship whereas only 33.2% were currently married. The average length of these non-marital, non-cohabiting romantic relationships was 4.5 years. It is critical that research on psychiatric disorders recognize the diversity of romantic relationships and does not assume that the only long term romantic coupling is through marriage. This is especially true of African Americans (Burton and Tucker, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2008).

There is an impressive literature on marriage and psychiatric disorders. This research indicates that among the total population (Kessler et al., 2005) and African Americans (Williams et al., 2007) married adults have lower rates of depression than their non-married counterparts. Our analysis investigates whether African Americans with depression are also less likely to be involved in a romantic relationship. We expect that African Americans who are depressed will not only be less likely to be married but will also

* Corresponding author at: School of Social Work, 1080 South University Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, United States. Tel.: +1 734 763 0411; fax: +1 734 763 3372.

E-mail address: rjtaylor@umich.edu (R.J. Taylor).

be less likely to be in a romantic relationship. This is based on research which indicates that major depression as well as other mental disorders increases the odds of divorce in first marriages (Kessler et al., 1998).

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The National Survey of American Life (NSAL) was collected by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. A total of 6082 face-to-face interviews were conducted with persons aged 18 or older, including 3570 African Americans. The overall response rate is 72.3% which was computed using the American Association of Public Opinion Research guidelines (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2006). The data collection was conducted from February 2001 to June 2003 (see Jackson et al., 2004 for a more detailed discussion of the NSAL). The NSAL was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board.

2.2. Measures

The DSM-IV World Mental Health Composite International Diagnostic Interview (WMH-CIDI), a fully structured diagnostic interview, was used to assess the dependent variables, 12-month and lifetime major depressive disorder (Kessler and Ustun, 2004).

This analysis uses marital status and two measures of relationship status. Marital status was assessed using a single item that asked respondents if they are currently: married, living with a partner, separated, divorced, widowed, or never married. Analyses revealed small and non-significant differences between those who reported being married ($n=928$; 33.2%) vs. those cohabiting with a partner ($n=253$; 8.8%), and were therefore combined and classified as being “married/cohabiting”. Additionally, there were too few cohabiting respondents with 12-month MDD ($n=17$) to have cohabitation as a separate category. Respondents who were separated, divorced, or widowed, were classified as “previously married”.

Previously and never married respondents were additionally asked whether they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. The first romantic relationship status variable has three categories: (1) currently married or cohabiting, (2) unmarried and has a romantic relationship, (3) unmarried and does not have a romantic relationship. An expanded version of this measure has five categories: (1) currently married or cohabiting, (2) previously married and does not have a romantic relationship, (3) previously married and has a romantic relationship, (4) never married and does not have a romantic relationship, and (5) never married and has a romantic relationship. It is important to note that relationship status measures the respondents' current status and that all of the categories are mutually exclusive.

Demographic variables examined are gender, age, and education in years. Poverty ratio was calculated as household income in relation to the poverty threshold based on household composition.

2.3. Analysis strategy

One-hundred and sixty participants with missing data on any variables were excluded from analyses. The use of listwise deletion in cases where missing data represents less than 10% of the sample is considered to be acceptable, having little impact on the validity of statistical inferences. The percentages reported in Table 1 represent weighted proportions based on the distribution of African Americans in the population. The Rao–Scott χ^2 represents a complex design-corrected measure of association. Logistic

regression analysis was used and odds ratio estimates and 95% confidence intervals are presented along with the design-corrected F statistic. All analyses were conducted using SAS-callable SUDAAN (Version 9.0, RTI International) which uses the Taylor expansion approximation technique for calculating the complex design-based estimates of variance. To obtain results that are generalizable to the African American population standard error estimates are corrected for unequal probabilities of selection, nonresponse, poststratification, and the sample's complex design.

3. Results

The distribution of variables is presented in Table 1. Marital and relationship status had significant bivariate associations with MDD; persons who were married/cohabiting consistently had the lowest prevalence of both 12-month and lifetime MDD. Results from the weighted logistic regression analyses are presented in Table 2 and indicate that each of the three marital and relationship status variables continued to have significant associations with both 12-month and lifetime MDD, even after controlling for demographic characteristics. An examination of the marital status variable indicated that previously married respondents had significantly higher levels of 12-month and lifetime MDD than their married/cohabiting counterparts. For the 3-category relationship status variable, respondents who were not in a current relationship had significantly greater odds of both 12-month and lifetime MDD, compared to those who were married or cohabiting.

For the 5-category relationship status variable, those not currently in a relationship who were either previously married (OR=2.43, 95% CI=1.35, 4.38) or never married (OR=1.81, 95% CI=1.09, 3.00) had significantly greater odds of 12-month MDD than those who were married/cohabiting. These same associations were significant for lifetime depression; respondents who were not in a current romantic relationship and were previously married (OR=1.70, 95% CI=1.06, 2.71) or never married (OR=1.45, 95% CI=1.02, 2.06) had significantly greater odds of being depressed. Respondents who were previously married and in a current relationship also had significantly higher odds of 12-month (OR=1.90 95% CI=0.95, 3.82) and lifetime (OR=2.11, 95% CI=1.33, 3.37) MDD compared to those who were married/cohabiting. Lastly, respondents who were never married but in a current relationship most closely resembled persons who were married or cohabiting for both 12-month and lifetime MDD.

4. Discussion

The findings of this report indicate that African Americans who are depressed are not only less likely to be married; they are also significantly less likely to be involved in a romantic relationship. This holds for both 12-month and lifetime major depressive disorder. Our results suggest that depression may impede the development and fostering of romantic relationships as well as marriage.

Kessler's seminal research on marriage and psychiatric disorders (Forthofer et al., 1996; Kessler et al., 1998) argues that psychiatric disorders negatively impacts marriage. In particular, individuals with psychiatric disorders are more likely to marry early and have a substantially higher risk of divorce. Based upon this research we created the second romantic relationship status variable that incorporates both whether a person has been previously married as well as whether they are in a romantic relationship. An examination of these findings expands our understanding of the association between romantic involvement

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