SEX DIFFERENCES IN FACIAL EMOTION LABELLING IN DEPRESSED AND HEALTHY INDIVIDUALS

Research Objectives:
It is well-established that individuals with Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) exhibit negative biases in processing and interpreting emotional information. Sex differences in facial emotion labelling biases have been reported in studies of healthy individuals, but sex differences among MDD patients have not been adequately explored. We compared male and female participants diagnosed with MDD in their tendency to judge facial expressions to address this. Findings of this study can help inform whether sex should be considered when examining biased emotional processing in MDD. We examined whether sex moderates facial emotion labelling bias and sensitivity to sad versus happy faces in depressed patients and healthy controls.

Methods:
Participants recruited from outpatient psychiatric clinics and community completed a computer-based task to rate a continuum of morphed facial expressions as happy or sad. A 2x2 ANOVA comparison and regression were performed to examine patterns of bias and sensitivity across groups. Bias was defined as a shift point where the most probable label shifted from “sad” to “happy”. Sensitivity was operationalized as the intensity of expression needed to elicit a correct response.

Results:
There were no significant differences between sexes in labelling bias ($p = .60$) or sensitivity ($p = .80$) to sad versus happy faces in both depressed and healthy subsets. However, preliminary evidence suggests there is a trend towards significance for increased symptom severity and greater sensitivity in depressed females.

Conclusions:
While no significant differences were identified, this study serves as a foundation for further inquests into sex differences in facial emotion labelling ability within mood disorders.

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