Ethnic and Gender Differences in Psychiatric Disorders

By Sasha Cohen

Two studies conducted by NIDA researchers suggest that the chance of a substance abuse disorder and psychiatric illness happening at the same time may be affected by ethnic and gender differences.

At the University of Miami in Florida, Dr. Michael Robbins researched the prevalence of substance abuse among Hispanic and African-American adolescents receiving outpatient therapy. The study distinguished between externalizing disorders -- those marked by a lack of self-control -- and internalizing disorders -- evident by sadness and withdrawal. Robbins argues that because there is a high incidence of substance abuse and psychiatric illness occurring at the same time, substance abuse cannot be treated alone but must be treated at the same time as the mental illness.

One hundred and sixty-seven Hispanic and African-American 12- to 17-year olds were the subjects of this study. All of them had been suggested for outpatient treatment for substance abuse, had completed the Adolescent Drug Abuse Diagnosis to assess drug use, and had taken the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children -- Predictive Scales to screen for nine possible psychiatric disorders. Overall, both groups tended to use the same drugs and had similar rates of co-occurring psychiatric illness. Alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine were reportedly used by 35, 80, and 17 percent respectively. Co-occurrence of mental illness was found in 87 percent of the subjects, with 19 percent of these subjects reporting symptoms for only one disorder and 54 percent with symptoms for three or more disorders.
While 78 percent of Hispanics reported symptoms of externalizing disorders such as ADHD and ODD, only 65 percent of African-Americans did. The internalizing disorder agoraphobia, or fear of going outside, was markedly higher in African-Americans. This statistic, however, may be related to legitimate fears due to living in dangerous neighborhoods. Similarly, one must consider the fact that these subjects had been referred for outpatient treatment, and it is possible that African-American adolescents may receive different treatment such as jail or detention. With respect to the Hispanic adolescents, it appears that substance abuse must be treated within a larger social context, including family and school.

Dr. William Latimer and colleagues have found that gender differences exist among adolescent substance abusers. Males had a higher rate of externalizing disorders and females of internalizing disorders. This study involved 135 subjects between 12 and 19 years of age. They all met the criteria for one or more psychoactive substance use disorders (PSUDs) and completed the Diagnostic Interview for Children and Adolescents, which assessed the PSUDs as well as psychiatric disorders. Sixty-eight and 75 percent of the girls and boys, respectively, reported marijuana abuse. While girls were more likely to abuse only one drug, boys were more likely to be dependent upon more than one. ADHD and Conduct Disorder were twice as common in males as in females, while major depressive disorder was three times more likely in females than in males. As with Dr. Robbins, Dr. Latimer suggests that because substance abuse and mental illness often happen at the same time in adolescents the two should be treated at the same time as well.
For further information regarding this article please contact the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory West Campus, 1256 Briarcliff Road N.E., Suite 323-West, Atlanta GA, 30306. You can email us at msacd@listserv.cc.emory.edu, visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD, or phone us at 404-712-9800.

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases.