Human Sciences Research Council Subjective social inequalities in depression: a decomposition analysis for South Africa

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Background

Inequalities in mental health are a notable and well documented policy concern in many countries, including the developing world. This is the case both for more objective measures of socio-economic status or position but also for subjective social status, which has close ties with health. Yet, researchers to date have not applied the standard analytical tools of concentration indices and decomposition analysis to the study of subjective social status and health, nor have researchers investigated subjective social inequalities in health in a South African context.

Methods

This study employed the cross-sectional 2014 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). Concentration indices (CI) were used to measure subjective social inequalities in the severity and prevalence of depression. A decomposition analysis was conducted in order to determine the factors that contribute to subjective social inequalities in depression. Depression was measured using the CES-D 8-item scale, with analyses disaggregated by sex.

Results

More than 35% of the study sample reported having depression (95% CI 33.57 – 36.95) whilst the overall mean score on CES-D 8 was 8.4 (95% CI 8.30 – 8.53). The concentration index for prevalence and severity of depression were -0.2800 and -0.0673, respectively. Both the prevalence and severity of depression was more pronounced in females (36.65 versus 33.77; p=0.0961 and 8.56 versus 8.23; p=0.0021, respectively). The most important contributor to subjective social inequalities in the prevalence and severity of depression, at 48%, is subjective social status itself. Other variables that made large significant contributions to the depression prevalence and depression severity were childhood conflict (11% and 11%) and race (27% and 20%).

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that depression in South Africa is concentrated among those with a lower subjective social status. We find that the prevalence and severity of depression was higher in females when compared to males. Policies that address inequalities in SSS and childhood adversity should be adopted to address depression inequalities in South Africa.