

# Gender Disparities in Psychiatric Assessment Items: The Role of Emotion Content

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**Introduction:** It is well documented that, beginning in adolescence, male and female psychopathologies follow distinct trajectories, with females exhibiting higher levels of depression and anxiety than males (Halbreich & Kahn, 2007). That stated, endorsing an item on a self administered psychiatric assessment is only as accurate as the reporting of the participant. In general, females have a more complex ability of emotional expression than males (Barrett et al., 2000). This study seeks to explore if expressed emotions plays a role in gender differences on item endorsement in the SCL90-R (Derogatis, 1983).

**Hypothesis:** Due to a higher and more nuanced level of emotional expression, female adolescents will endorse items on a self-administered symptom checklist that contain the word *feeling* significantly higher than same aged males.

**Sample:** The sample consisted of 451 youth (236 female) that participated in the Iowa Youth and Families Project (Conger & Conger, 2002), which began when the participants were in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (M age = 12.61).

**Measures:** Internalizing symptoms were assessed utilizing the SCL90-R (Derogatis, 1977).

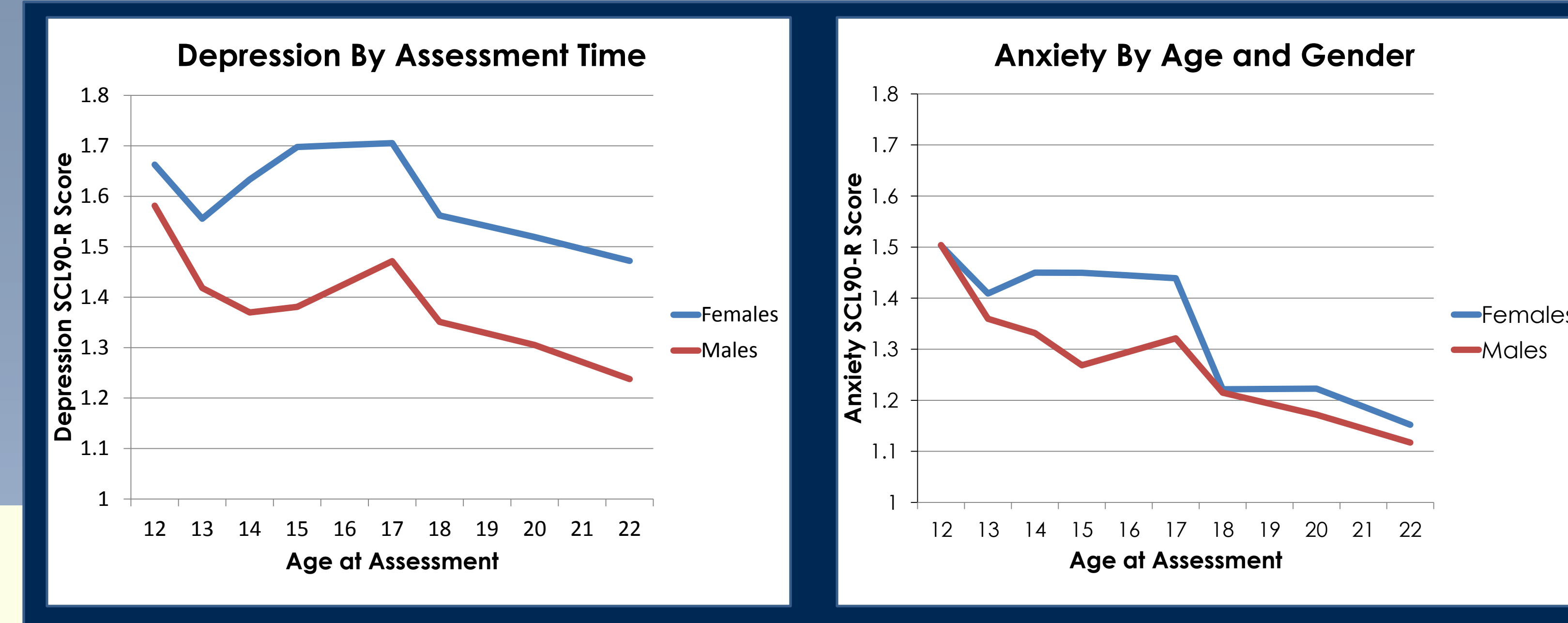


Figure 1: Total depression and anxiety scores by gender from ages 12 to 22.

- Females reported higher levels of depression from the age of 12 on, with the largest differences occurring at age 15,  $t(383) = 5.55, p < .001$
- Females reported higher anxiety levels at ages 12 through 17, with the largest difference also occurring at age 15,  $t(394) = 3.67, p < .001$ .

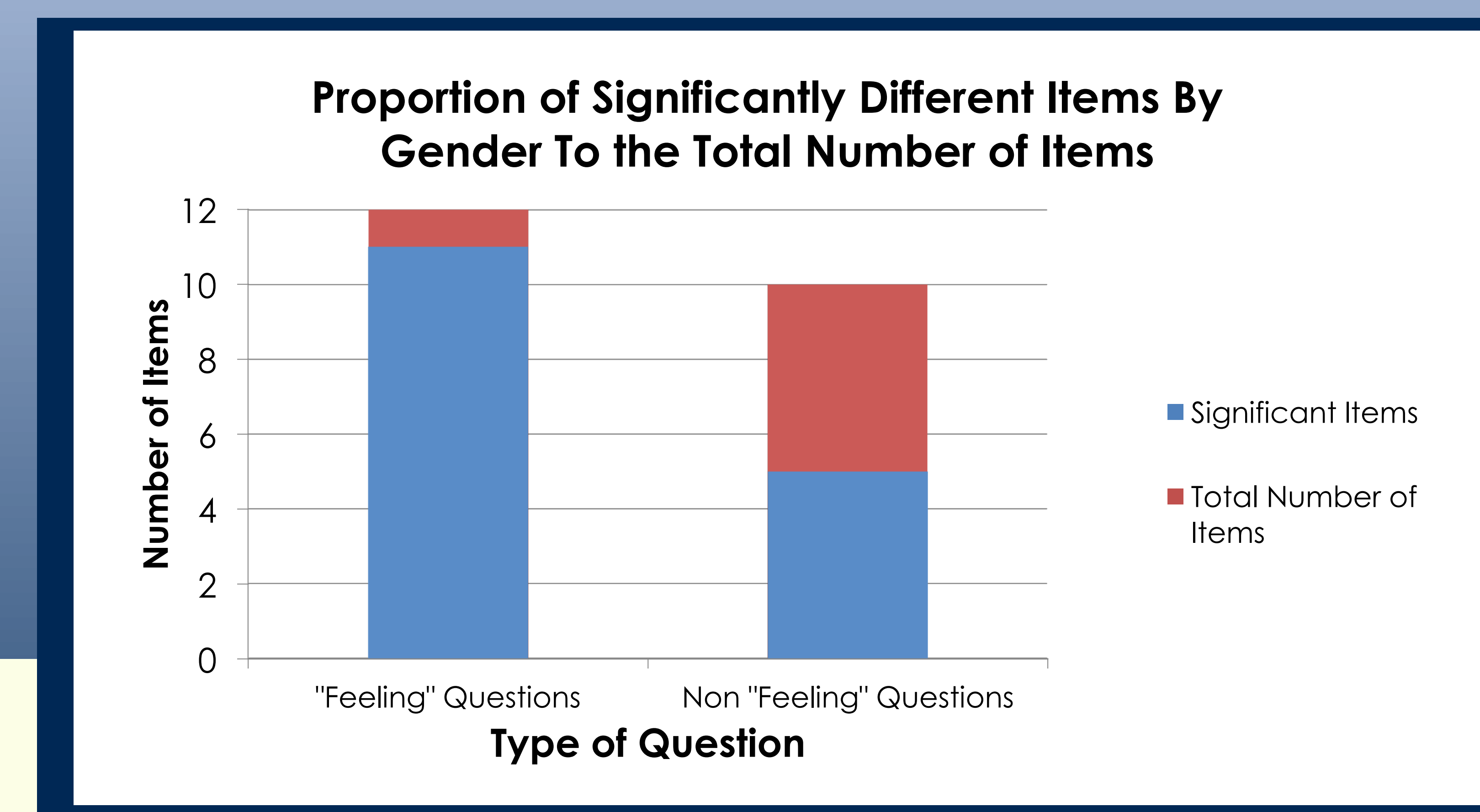


Figure 2: The number of significantly different items by gender was itself significant between the two question types,  $t(13) = -2.24, p = .043$ .

**Summary of Results:** At age 15, anxiety and depression individual item scores were significantly higher for females on 16 of the 22 pooled anxiety and depression items, with no items statistically higher for males.

- Of the 12 items that include the word “feeling” across the two dimensions (i.e., “feelings of worthlessness”), 11 were scored significantly higher by females than males (91.67%) versus 5 of the 10 remaining items (50%)
- The only item containing the word “feeling” not scored significantly higher by females addresses a lack of feelings rather than their presence (e.g., feeling no interest in things.)

**Discussion:** Higher scores on items that label negative feeling states increase total scores of anxiety and depression on internalizing assessments

- Low scores on these items might be indicative of lower presence of feeling states, or of lower emotional awareness or level of emotional sharing.
- Affect labeling has been shown to decrease amygdala response to affective stimuli (Lieberman et al., 2007). Lower awareness or sharing might manifest itself in lower levels of endorsement of a depression or anxiety item while exacerbating the effects the underlying factor has on the mental health of the individual.
- While some of the gender differences in depression and anxiety scores may be explained by emotional content of items, it is important to note that it does not account for all of the gender difference.

• Results highlight the need for a better understanding of the multiple courses depression and anxiety symptoms might manifest for the individual.

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