

Alexithymia in College-Aged Students

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Research Questions

- What is the prevalence of clinical and normative alexithymia in college-aged students?
- Is there variation across genders?
- Is there a relationship between alexithymia and attitudes toward help-seeking behavior?

Background

Alexithymia

- Alexithymia is a personality trait (most common in males) (Levant et al., 2009).
 - Defined as "having trouble identifying feelings, not being able to distinguish between feelings and bodily sensations, and difficulty describing one's feelings to others." (Levant et al., 2014, p. 324).
 - Associated with impaired verbal and nonverbal recognition of emotions (Montebarocci et al., 2011).
- Normative male alexithymia hypothesis explains the restricted identification and recognition of emotions that is influenced by traditional male ideology (Levant et al., 2014).
 - Indicated that all young men are taught not to express their emotions which result in a range of levels of alexithymia (Levant et al., 2014).
- Alexithymia may be a reason that men, or others with the trait, do not seek treatment (Levant et al., 2009).

Help-Seeking Behavior

- 26.2% of Americans 18 years or older have a diagnosable mental disorder (NIMH, 2013), but only half receive treatment (SAMHSA, 2015).
- Gender roles and biology contribute to differences in mental health symptoms and help-seeking behavior (World Health Organization, 2002).
- Men are less likely to seek psychological help due to traditional gender roles and emotional expression concerns (Good et al., 1989).
- Age also plays a role in help-seeking behavior -- the older men are, the more likely they are to seek professional psychological help (Berger et al., 2005).
- Men might be more likely to seek psychological help if it is more thinking-focused and works on problem solving skills (Berger et al., 2005; Wisch et al., 1995).

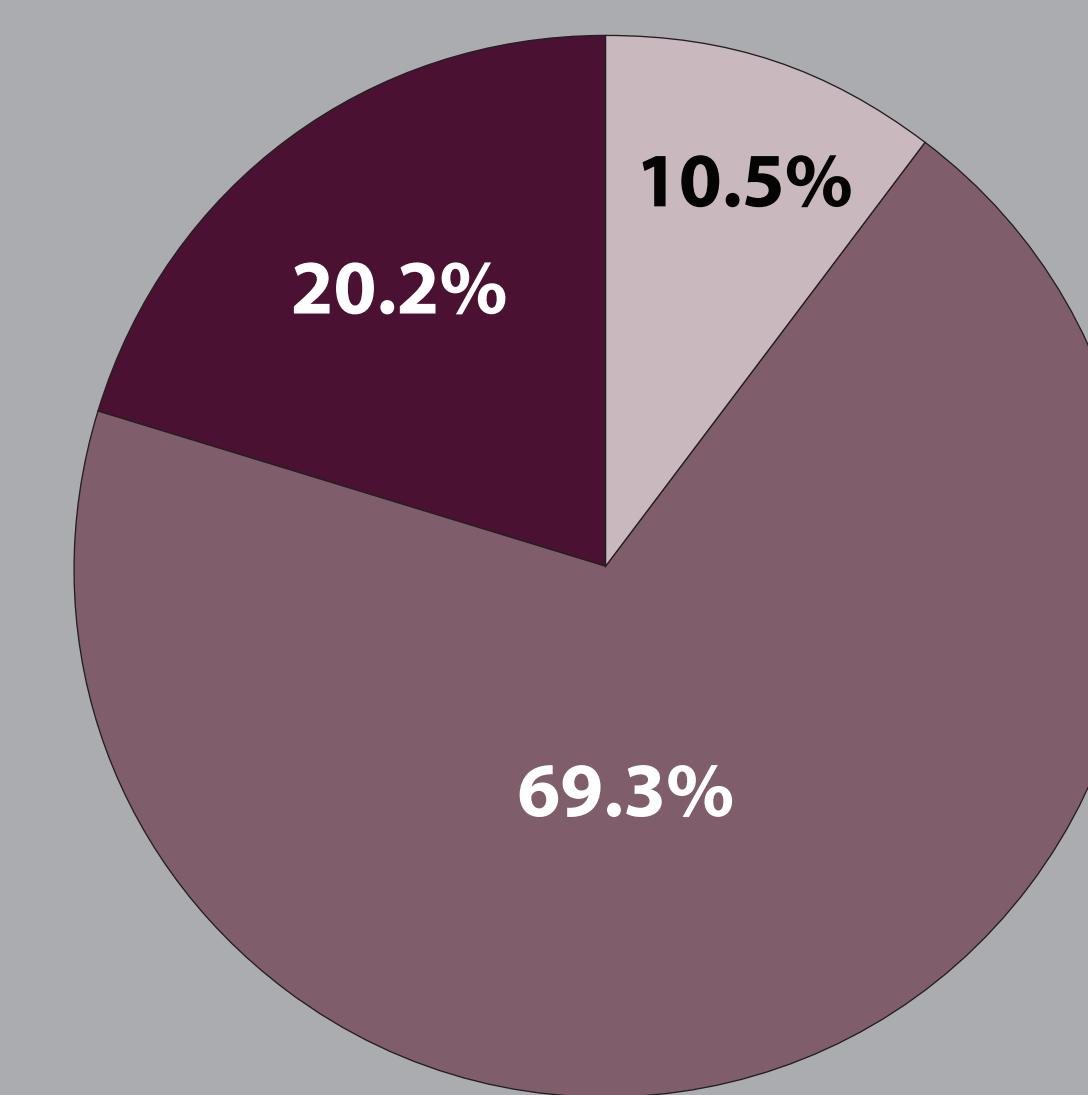
Participants

- 548 college-aged students (ages 18-24, M= 19.77 and SD= 1.544)
- From colleges and universities in the U.S.; most located in the Western N.Y. region
- 68.7% women, 31.3% men; 79.5% white, 6% Hispanic or Latino, 7.3% black or African American, 1.1%, Native American, 3.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% multiple race/ethnicities endorsed, 0.4% other
- 66.6% have never been diagnosed with a mental disorder, 7.5% diagnosed within last 12 months, 24.2% diagnosed in lifetime, 1.7% unsure

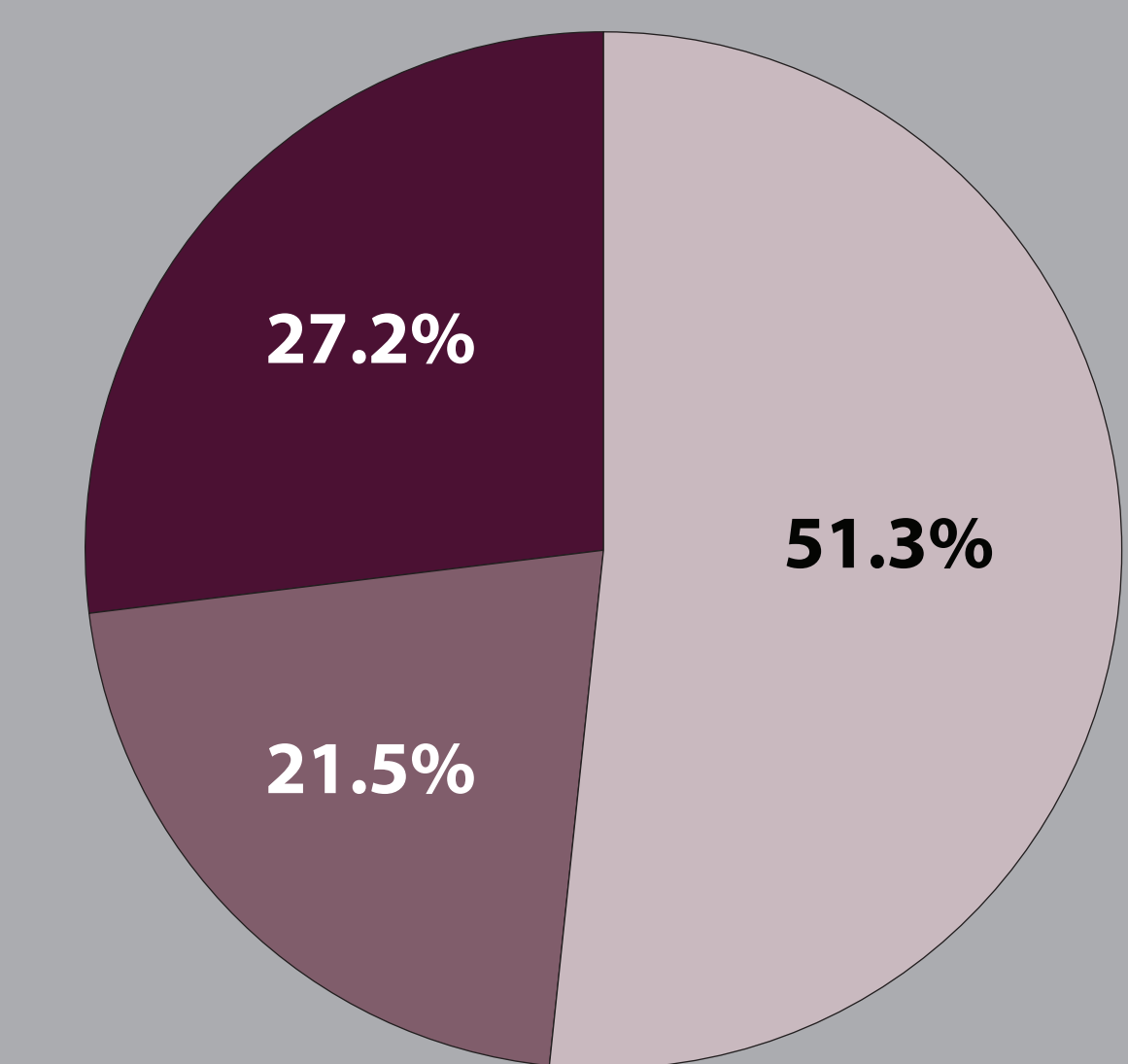
Measures

- **Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS)**. 20-item inventory used to assess clinical alexithymia by measuring 3 factors: difficulty identifying feelings, difficulty describing feelings, and externally-oriented thinking
- **Normative Male Alexithymia Scale (NMAS)**. 14-item self-report measure that uses a 7-point Likert scale to assess normative male alexithymia, a milder form of alexithymia.
- **Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help (ATSPPH)**. 29 item self-report in a Likert scale format that is used to assess attitudes toward help-seeking.

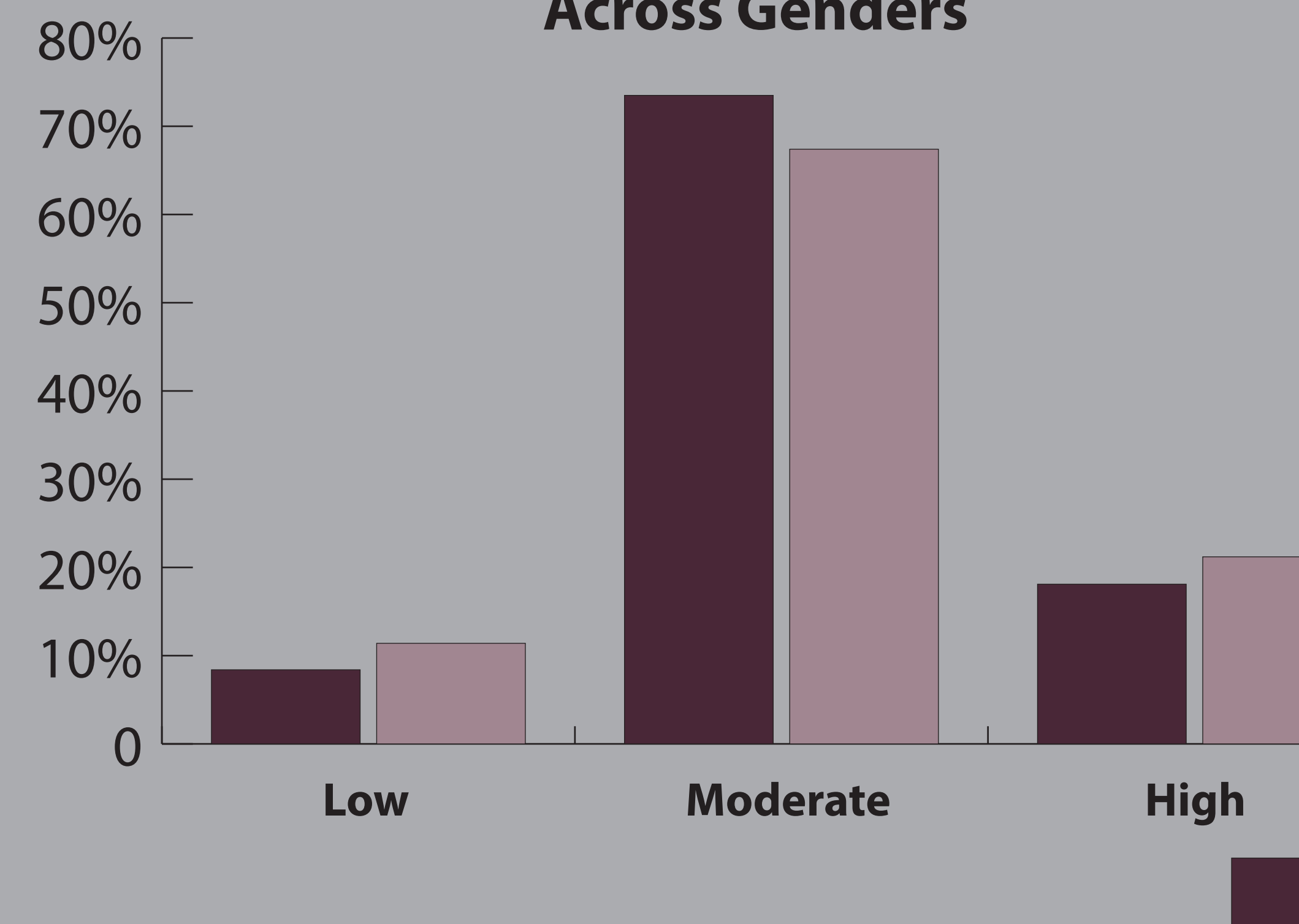
Prevalence of Normative Alexithymia in College-aged Students



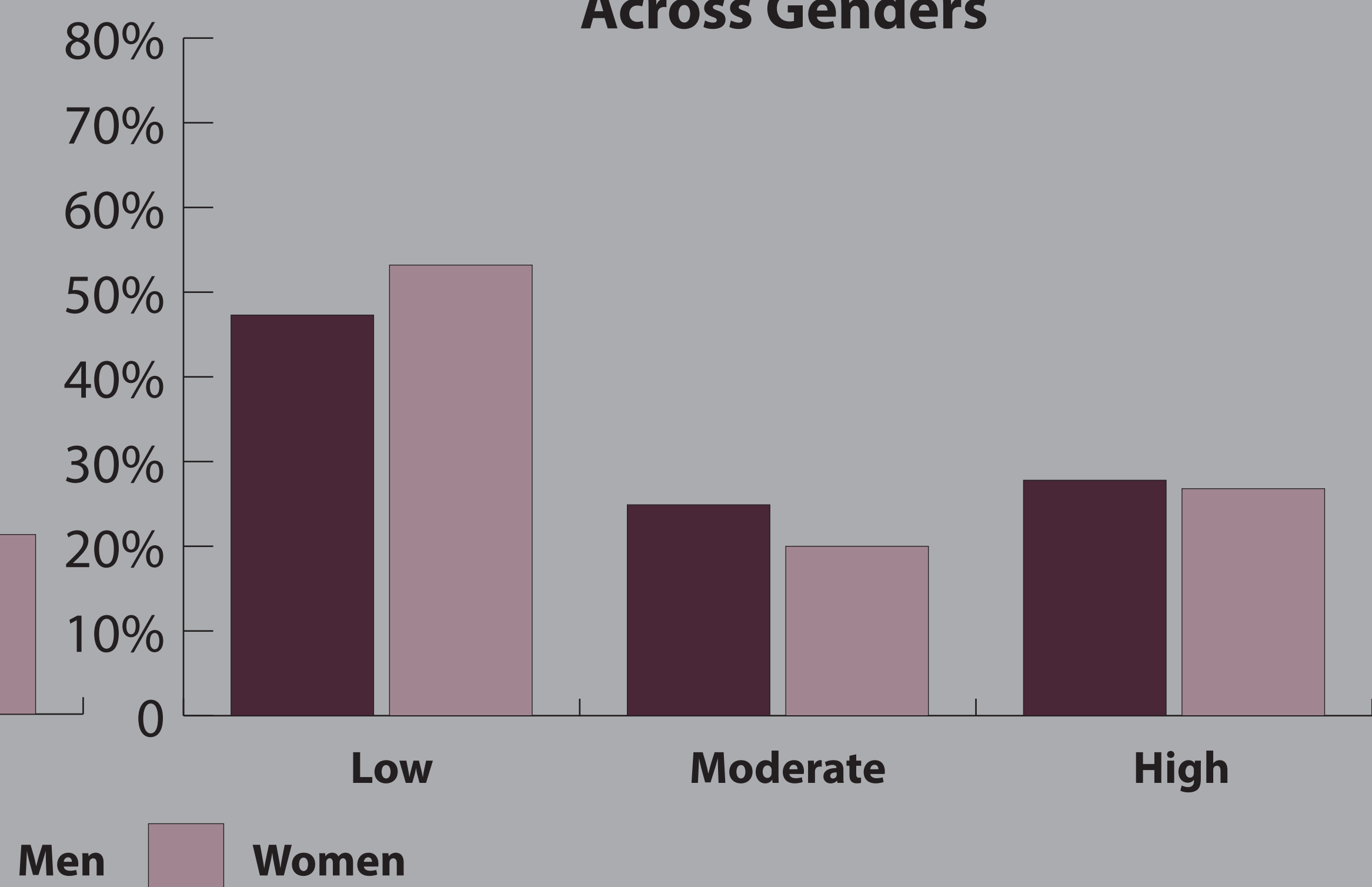
Prevalence of Clinical Alexithymia in College-aged Students



Prevalence of Normative Alexithymia Across Genders



Prevalence of Clinical Alexithymia Across Genders



Results & Conclusions

- NMAS total score and attitudes towards help-seeking: $\beta = -.074, p = .191$
- TAS total score and attitudes towards help-seeking: $\beta = .594, p < .01$
- Moderate normative and low clinical alexithymia are the most prevalent levels in college-aged students
 - May be due to the fact that we do not verbally communicate as much anymore; technology-based communication is dominant especially among millennials (Botterill et al., 2015)
- Similar results for women and men on both clinical and normative alexithymia measures
 - May be due to a cultural shift that is occurring; women are becoming more similar to men in their roles (Perrone et al., 2009)
- Individuals who have a higher score on the NMAS have more negative attitudes towards seeking help; may be due to inability to identify and describe emotions
- Individuals who have a higher score on the TAS have more positive attitudes towards seeking help; may not be able to communicate their emotions, but they are aware this is a problem so they have better attitudes towards seeking help
- Future research could look at the connection between alexithymia and help-seeking behavior, not just attitudes, as well as alexithymia's connection to both male and female gender roles.