



Vulnerability-specific stress generation: Childhood emotional abuse and the mediating role of depressogenic interpersonal processes

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ABSTRACT

Stress generation in depression (i.e. the tendency for depression-prone individuals to experience more life stress that is in part influenced by the individual) has been well established. However, more research is necessary to clarify the role of specific types of life stress in this effect. The current study extends the stress generation hypothesis by examining whether the type of stress involved is contingent upon the nature of the individual's particular vulnerability. Childhood emotional abuse and interpersonal vulnerability factors were predicted to be associated with prospective interpersonal dependent but not non-interpersonal or independent stress. These interpersonal factors were examined as mediators of the association between childhood emotional abuse and interpersonal stress generation. Data were collected from 185 undergraduate participants at two time-points, four months apart. At baseline, participants completed assessments of depressive symptoms, childhood abuse history, interpersonal risk factors (rejection sensitivity, excessive reassurance-seeking, and negative feedback-seeking), and a diagnostic interview for depression. At the follow-up assessment, participants completed a life stress interview. Childhood emotional abuse prospectively predicted greater interpersonal dependent stress, but not non-interpersonal dependent or independent stress. Only rejection sensitivity mediated this relationship. Consistent with the stress generation hypothesis, neither childhood emotional abuse nor the three interpersonal risk factors predicted independent stress. These findings suggest that targeting interpersonal vulnerabilities in clinical settings, particularly rejection sensitivity, among individuals with a history of childhood emotional abuse, may help to reduce the occurrence of interpersonal dependent stress, thus possibly decreasing risk for depression.

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1. Introduction

Substantial empirical support has been found for the stress generation hypothesis in depression (Hammen, 1991, 2006), according to which, individuals vulnerable to depression are more likely to experience higher rates of negative events that are in part influenced by their own behavior (i.e., dependent stress), but not to differ in their rates of negative events that occur outside the influence of their behavior (i.e., independent stress; for reviews, see Hammen, 2006; Liu & Alloy, 2010). The

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stress generation effect seems particularly relevant to dependent stress occurring within interpersonal domains (Hammen, 2006); this relation is notable because both interpersonal and dependent life stress, when compared to other forms of stress, are more predictive of depressive onset (Hammen, Marks, Mayol, & DeMayo, 1985; Kendler, Karkowski, & Prescott, 1999; Slavich, O'Donovan, Epel, & Kemeny, 2010). As a result, the generation of interpersonal dependent life stress may potentially maintain current depression or increase the likelihood of depressive recurrence (Hammen, 1991, 2006). Given the potential role of stress generation in depressive chronicity, it is important to delineate the processes underlying this phenomenon. Distal risk factors may facilitate identification of at-risk individuals, whereas proximal risk factors may inform our understanding of potential targets for clinical intervention.

One such distal risk factor is childhood emotional abuse (CEA; Gross & Keller, 1992; Spertus, Yehuda, Wong, Halligan, & Seremetis, 2003). CEA has been shown to be a stronger risk factor of depression than other subtypes of childhood abuse (i.e., childhood physical abuse [CPA] and childhood sexual abuse [CSA]). In fact, three meta-analytic reviews have found consistently stronger associations between depression and CEA than CSA and CPA (Infurna et al., 2016; Mandelli, Petrelli, & Serretti, 2015; Norman et al., 2012). Furthermore, and of direct relevance to the current study, CEA has been implicated in depressogenic stress generation. Two studies (Hankin, 2005) provide mixed support for this relationship, with one showing a prospective relation between CEA and negative life events over a 10-week period, and the other failing to find this relationship over a 2-year period. Another study followed a college sample over a 7-week period and found a positive association between CEA and negative life events (Uhrlass & Gibb, 2007). Although these studies are important for providing the first empirical evaluations of CEA in relation to stress generation, their mixed findings may in part be due to the absence of distinction between dependent and independent stress. Given the specificity of stress generation to dependent stress, this distinction is important for ensuring that any putative stress generation effect is not obscured by the inclusion of independent stress with dependent stress. Two more recent studies observing this distinction are consistent in documenting an association between CEA and dependent stress (Harkness et al., 2015; Liu, Choi, Boland, Mastin, & Alloy, 2013). Collectively, there thus appears to be general support for the role of CEA in stress generation.

Although there appears to be support for CEA as a distal risk factor for stress generation, the proximal risk factors mediating this relationship are less clear. Elucidating the pathways underlying this relationship is important insofar as it may uncover actionable targets for breaking the chain in the long-term risk for depression associated with CEA. Thus far, one study has examined the role of depressogenic cognitive styles in stress generation among individuals with a history of childhood abuse, finding that CEA, but not CSA or CPA, prospectively predicted greater stress generation, and negative cognitive styles mediated this relation (Liu et al., 2013). These findings suggest that targeting negative cognitive styles in individuals with a history of CEA may help lessen the occurrence of negative life events. Given that stress generation has been described as an action theory, in which individuals have an active role in shaping their environments (Hammen, 2006), interpersonal risk factors may be especially relevant candidate mediators of the association between CEA and stress generation. Consistent with this possibility, experiences of childhood abuse have been associated with difficulties in interpersonal functioning later in life (Salwen, Hymowitz, Vivian, & O'Leary, 2014). In the current study, three such behavioral tendencies previously implicated in risk for depression were examined as potential mediators of the relation between CEA and interpersonal stress generation: (1) excessive reassurance-seeking (ERS); (2) negative feedback-seeking (NFS); and (3) rejection sensitivity. These depressogenic interpersonal processes were specifically chosen as the focus of the current investigation as prior research has found them to be associated with CEA (Massing-Schaffer, Liu, Kraines, Choi, & Alloy, 2015).

1.1. Excessive reassurance-seeking

ERS is defined as the relatively stable tendency to excessively and repeatedly seek assurance from others that one is lovable and worthy, regardless of whether such assurance has already been provided (Joiner, Alfano, & Metalsky, 1992; Joiner, Metalsky, Katz, & Beach, 1999). According to Coyne's (1976) interpersonal model of depression, individuals prone to depression seek assurance from others in an attempt to improve their feelings of low self-worth. However, these individuals tend to doubt the initial response they are given, thus causing them to seek further affirmation to the eventual frustration of those from whom they seek reassurance. Several studies support this model (see Starr & Davila, 2008 for review). ERS has been implicated as a risk factor for the development and maintenance of depression (Joiner & Metalsky, 2001; Joiner et al., 1999) and as a force behind interpersonal rejection (Benazon, 2000; Joiner et al., 1992). Of particular relevance to the current study, ERS has also been found to predict the generation of interpersonal stress (Birgenheir, Pepper, & Johns, 2010; Potthoff, Holahan, & Joiner, 1995; Shih, Abela, & Starrs, 2009).

1.2. Negative feedback seeking

In addition to seeking positive reassurance, depression-prone individuals also solicit disapproval and criticism from others through NFS as it confirms their negative self-concept (Swann, 1987). Several studies have linked NFS to depression. Compared to non-depressed individuals, depressed individuals express more interest in negative feedback (Casbon, Burns, Bradbury, & Joiner, 2005), seek more negative feedback (Swann, Wenzlaff, Krull, & Pelham, 1992), and prefer to be around people who view them negatively (Swann et al., 1992). NFS has also been proposed as a possible mechanism of stress generation (Joiner, 2000), though this relation has yet to be tested.

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