



Sex differences in domain-specific depressogenic cognitive responses to negative and positive life events



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ABSTRACT

Maladaptive cognitive responses to stressful life events represent well-replicated risk factors for depression. Research indicates that stressful life events that are dependent on the individual to occur or are interpersonal may generate more maladaptive cognitive responses than those that are independent and/or non-interpersonal. The current study examined the roles of sex and life event domains in eliciting depressogenic cognitive responses. Participants were 212 (71% female) undergraduate students who completed seven weekly questionnaires on participant-identified most negative and most positive life events over the previous 7 days. Additionally, participants reported levels of brooding and cognitive style in response to the most negative event and levels of positive rumination and dampening in response to the most positive event. Data were analyzed using mixed ANOVAs. Results indicated that females engaged in greater brooding regardless of event dependency. In addition, dependent and interpersonal life events generated greater brooding while dependent and non-interpersonal negative events generated greater negative cognitive style. An interaction between sex and domain was observed for dampening positive life events, such that males did not differ between interpersonal and non-interpersonal life events while females were more likely to dampen following interpersonal life events than non-interpersonal events.

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1. Introduction

Cognitive vulnerability-stress models of depression suggest that certain cognitive responses to negative and positive stressful life events confer risk for depression (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Ciesla, Felton, & Roberts, 2011). Stressful life events may be characterized as any event that requires the individual to adapt and respond (Lazarus, 1990) and can differ in valence, such as whether they are appraised by the individual as positive or negative. Stressful life events can also differ by event domain, such as whether the event's occurrence was dependent on the individual behavior or independent and whether the event is non-interpersonal or interpersonal (Hankin, Stone, & Wright, 2010). There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the extent to which a stressful life event is dependent on one's actions and/or is interpersonal exert unique effects on mental health outcomes in adolescence (Kendler, Thornton, & Prescott, 2001), and adolescents may be particularly likely to deploy maladaptive cognitive responses

that over time predict depressive symptoms (Nicolai, Laney, & Mezulis, 2013). Research also suggests that females and males may respond differently to certain domains of stressful life events, which may partially account for the sex difference in depression among older adolescents (Mezulis, Abramson, & Hyde, 2002). Examining how cognitive responses to negative and positive life events may differ across life event domain and sex may improve understanding of cognitive influences in the emergence of the sex difference in depression prevalence that emerges in adolescence. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine how depressogenic cognitive responses may differ by event domain and sex among older adolescents.

1.1. Stressful life events may elicit maladaptive cognitive responses

Research suggests that maladaptive cognitive responses to stressful life events affect the duration and intensity of the emotional states elicited by such events (Feldman, Joormann, & Johnson, 2008; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). Maladaptive cognitive responses may include responding to negative life events with cognitive responses that intensify or prolong negative mood states and/or responding to positive life events with cognitive responses that diminish or shorten positive mood states.

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1.1.1. Cognitive responses to negative life events

Maladaptive cognitive responses to negative life events include those that direct attention toward negative stimuli or evaluate the event in ways that intensify negative emotions and predispose individuals to depressive symptoms (Beck, 1967). One maladaptive cognitive response is *brooding*, which describes responding to negative events and mood states with perseverative cognitive focus on negative content about the self, world and future. Brooding represents a maladaptive cognitive process that predicts greater depressive symptoms (Treyner, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Research demonstrates that brooding in response to negative life events predicts greater depressive symptoms (Mezulis, Simonson, McCauly, & Vander Stoep, 2011). More specifically, brooding in response to events that depend on the person's actions to occur or are interpersonal predicts depressive symptoms. However, no effect of brooding is found for independent and non-interpersonal domains (Nicolai et al., 2013).

Another maladaptive cognitive response to negative life events is *negative cognitive style*. According to hopelessness theory of depression (Abramson et al., 1989), individuals with a negative cognitive style generate negative inferences about themselves, global and stable attributions about the causes of events, and negative expectations of future consequences. Negative cognitive style represents a cognitive vulnerability to depression, with greater negative cognitive style predicting greater depressive symptoms among older adolescents (Hankin, Fraley, & Abela, 2005; Hyde, Mezulis, & Abramson, 2008). Although brooding and negative cognitive style both describe depressogenic cognitive responses, they represent distinct cognitive responses to negative life events that uniquely predict depressive symptoms (Hankin, Lakdawalla, Latchis-Carter, Abela, & Adams, 2007).

1.1.2. Cognitive responses to positive life events

Similar to negative life events, positive life events also may elicit cognitive responses that predispose individuals to depressive symptoms by diminishing positive emotions elicited by events (Fredrickson, 2001). One cognitive response to positive life events is *positive rumination*, which describes responding to positive events and mood states with perseverative cognitive focus on positive content. Positive rumination represents an adaptive cognitive process that predicts fewer depressive symptoms distinctly from rumination in response to negative life events (Feldman et al., 2008).

Another cognitive response to positive life events is *dampening*, which describes responding to positive events and mood states by suppressing positive emotions or distracting attention from positive events (Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010). Dampening predicts greater depressive symptoms independently of brooding and positive rumination (Feldman et al., 2008; Raes, Smets, Nelis, & Schoofs, 2012). Positive rumination represents an adaptive cognitive response, while dampening represents a maladaptive cognitive response to stressful life events. While the emerging research on cognitive responses to positive life events demonstrates the differential effects of positive rumination and dampening on depressive symptoms (Feldman et al., 2008; Quoidbach et al., 2010; Raes et al., 2012); however, no research has investigated the effect of these responses by event domain.

1.2. Examining life events by valence and domain

Literature investigating the relationship between life events and depression has predominantly focused on stressful negative life events and how individuals cognitively respond in ways that increase or decrease negative emotions elicited by events. However, researchers have recently begun investigating the effects of responses to positive life events and how individuals may

cognitively respond in ways that increase or decrease positive emotions elicited by events (Feldman et al., 2008; Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). Research demonstrates that cognitive responses that increase negative emotions and diminish positive emotions predict depressive symptoms, indicating that responses to both negative and positive life events may be critical to understanding depression in adolescence (Raes et al., 2012).

In addition to varying by emotional valence, stressful life events can be differentiated by domain. Much of the extant research on stress has relied on global measures of stress exposure that address stress as a unitary construct (Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001). More recently, however, researchers have identified domains of life events which may have differential effects on depressive symptoms (Kendler et al., 2001; Nicolai et al., 2013). One event domain is the extent to which the event occurrence is dependent on the individual's actions, characteristics, or mood. For example, doing poorly on a test or school assignment likely was dependent upon the individual's actions and characteristics, whereas a death in the family likely was independent of the individual's actions and characteristics (Hankin et al., 2010). Several studies have documented a unique association between dependent negative life events and depressive symptoms (Hankin et al., 2010; Kercher & Rapee, 2009), supporting the argument that different domains of stressful life events exert differential effects in the prediction of depressive symptoms.

Another salient event domain, particularly in adolescence, is interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal life events involve interactions with others. For example, doing poorly on a test would be considered a non-interpersonal event, whereas an argument with a friend or parent would be considered an interpersonal event. Several studies found a unique influence of interpersonal stressors on mental health during adolescence (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cyranowski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000). For instance, increases in stress within friendships have been linked to lower self-esteem and greater depressive symptoms (Cambron, Acitelli, & Pettit, 2009). It may be that individuals are more likely to engage in maladaptive cognitive responses to interpersonal events, in turn increasing depressive symptoms. However, no research to our knowledge has investigated cognitive responses to positive life events by domain.

1.3. Sex differences in maladaptive cognitive responses to life events

In adolescence, females report significantly more depressive symptoms than males (Mezulis, Funasaki, Charbonneau, & Hyde, 2010; Wade, Cairney, & Pevalin, 2002). One reason for this sex difference may be that females are more likely to engage in maladaptive cognitive responses to life events and less likely to engage in adaptive cognitive responses. Research indicates that females display greater brooding (Mezulis et al., 2002) and greater cognitive style (Hankin & Abramson, 2002) in response to negative life events. In the emerging literature on domain-specific cognitive responses, research suggests that females exhibit greater brooding in response to interpersonal and achievement stressors domains (Mezulis et al., 2002) and greater negative cognitive style in response to stressors regarding physical appearance or body-image domains (Rood, Roelofs, Bögels, & Meesters, 2012). Sex differences in cognitive responses to positive life events may additionally contribute to the sex difference in depression. However, as noted above, there is little research examining which domains of positive life events are most likely to elicit maladaptive cognitive responses or whether event-specific cognitive responding differs by event domain for females and males.

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