



Brooding and reflecting in an interpersonal context

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ABSTRACT

Rumination consists of two components: brooding, which increases depressive feelings, and reflection, which appears to be unrelated to or protective against depression. The present study is the first to extend the intrapersonal constructs of brooding and reflection to the interpersonal context, thereby relying on previous work in the domain of co-rumination. In this two-wave longitudinal study, a community sample of 371 pupils (63.1% girls) aged 9–15 years was followed up over a three-month interval. Using items drawn from the Co-Rumination Questionnaire (Rose, 2002), a two-factor model distinguishing between co-brooding and co-reflection was validated using confirmatory factor analysis. Both co-brooding and co-reflection emerged as significant unique predictors of depressive symptoms over a three-month interval, above and beyond sex and baseline depressive symptoms. Co-brooding had a positive association with prospective depressive symptoms, whereas co-reflection was inversely related to prospective symptom levels. This pattern of results was unchanged when controlling for intrapersonal brooding and reflection. Post-hoc analyses revealed that co-brooding and co-reflection could be framed as higher order factors, each encompassing two lower-order factors and that the effects are carried by specific aspects of co-brooding and co-reflection, i.e., co-brooding on consequences and co-reflection on causes of problems.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period for the first onset of depression. By the end of adolescence, prevalence rates have increased as much as sixfold (e.g., Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006). Because recurrence rates from adolescence to adulthood are substantial (Birmaher, Arbelaez, & Brent, 2002) and even subclinical depressive symptoms are linked with impaired functioning (Roberts, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1991), it is important to identify factors that contribute to the onset and maintenance of depressive symptoms in youth.

An influential model of depression vulnerability is the Response Styles Theory (RST; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991), which posits that the way in which individuals respond to their depressive symptoms influences both the duration and the severity of these symptoms. Central to this theory is the concept of rumination, which refers to the “behaviors and thoughts that focus one’s attention on one’s depressive symptoms and on the implications of these symptoms” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991, p. 569). Rumination has been repeatedly shown to predict the onset, severity, persistence, and recurrence

of depressive symptoms in both adult and youth populations (for a review, see e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008).

More recently, rumination is considered as a two-dimensional construct, with brooding and reflection representing two components (Treyner, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Brooding is defined as “a passive comparison of one’s current situation with some unachieved standard” (e.g., thinking about a recent situation, wishing it had gone better), whereas reflection refers to “purposeful turning inward to engage in cognitive problem solving” (e.g., analyzing your personality to try to understand why you are depressed) (Treyner et al., 2003, p. 256). A growing body of evidence in both adult and preadult samples suggests that brooding predicts increases in depressive symptoms over time (e.g., Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Schoofs, Hermans, & Raes, 2010; Treyner et al., 2003), whereas reflection can be protective against prospective depression (e.g., Treyner et al., 2003; Verstraeten, Vasey, Raes, & Bijttebier, 2010; but see Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Schoofs et al., 2010).

Previously, rumination has been studied mainly as an intrapersonal response. However, researchers have begun to direct their attention to the interpersonal context of this response style. It was Rose (2002) who introduced the concept of co-rumination, i.e., “excessively discussing personal problems within a dyadic relationship” (p. 1830). Co-rumination is associated with greater positive friendship quality, but also with increased risk for

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emotional problems (Rose, 2002). For instance, higher levels of co-rumination were found to predict higher levels of concurrent depressive symptoms in both youth (Schwartz-Mette & Rose, 2012; Starr & Davila, 2009) and adults (Calmes & Roberts, 2008), and to be associated with a lifetime history of depressive disorders (Stone, Uhrlass, & Gibb, 2010). Also, co-rumination was found to predict increases in depressive symptoms over time (Hankin, Stone, & Wright, 2010; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007), as well as future depressive episodes, including first onsets (Stone, Hankin, Gibb, & Abela, 2011).

Given the value of considering interpersonal aspects of rumination, it makes sense to explore whether the intrapersonal aspects of the brooding and reflection components might also occur interpersonally and, if they do, to examine their unique associations with depressive symptoms. Toward this goal, the first aim of the current study was to identify relevant items within an existing measure of co-rumination (i.e., the Co-Rumination Questionnaire, Rose, 2002) and to determine if a distinction can be made between a more passive, repetitive and catastrophizing manner of co-rumination (i.e., co-brooding) and a more active, analyzing, and reflective form (i.e., co-reflection). To the best of our knowledge, no study thus far has looked at interpersonal variants of brooding and reflection.

If interpersonal aspects of brooding and reflection can indeed be distinguished, then it is reasonable to expect co-brooding, like intrapersonal brooding, to be related to higher levels of concurrent and prospective depressive symptoms. Predicting effects of co-reflection is less clear, as some authors in the rumination literature have found a positive relationship between reflection and depressive symptoms, whereas others found a negative relationship or no relationship at all. Thus, the second aim of this study was to examine to what extent the interpersonal aspects of brooding and reflection are differentially related to depressive symptoms, both concurrently and prospectively.

The third and final aim of the study was to investigate the extent to which interpersonal variants of brooding and reflection add to the prediction of depressive symptoms, over and above their intrapersonal counterparts. This way, the possibility can be ruled out that a potential relationship between components of co-rumination and depressive symptoms would be a mere consequence of a shared association with components of intrapersonal rumination.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A community sample of 401 pupils from the fifth and seventh grades of nine schools was approached. Parents of 16 children did not give their permission to participate and 11 children were absent on the day of administration. After eliminating the data of three pupils with random patterns of responding, the final Time 1 (T1) sample consisted of 371 pupils (63.1% girls) with a mean age of 11.73 years ($SD = 1.10$; range 9.42–15.00). Three-month follow-up (T2) data were available for 357 pupils (i.e., 96.2% of the T1 sample). Initial CDI scores were in the clinically significant range for 18.06% of the participants (i.e., score ≥ 16 ; Timbremont, Braet, & Roelofs, 2008).

2.2. Measures

The *Co-Rumination Questionnaire* (CRQ; Rose, 2002) is a 27-item self-report questionnaire tapping co-rumination with the closest, same-sex friend. Items are rated on a 5-point rating scale (1 = *not at all true* to 5 = *really true*). The first three authors (rumination experts) independently selected all the items in the original CRQ they

considered to be consistent with the definitions of brooding and reflection. Only items chosen by all three authors were retained, yielding six 'co-brooding' items (e.g., "When we talk about a problem that one of us has, we try to figure out every one of the bad things that might happen because of the problem") and five 'co-reflection' items (e.g., "When we talk about a problem that one of us has, we talk about all of the reasons why the problem might have happened").

The extended rumination subscale of the *Children's Response Styles Questionnaire* (CRSQ; Abela, Brozina, & Haigh, 2002; CRSQ-ext; Verstraeten et al., 2010) consists of 10 items tapping brooding and reflective responses to sadness using a 4-point rating scale (1 = *almost never* to 4 = *almost always*).

The *Children's Depression Inventory* (CDI; Kovacs, 2003) is a 27-item self-report questionnaire that measures cognitive, affective and behavioral symptoms of depression during the past two weeks. Each item is rated on a 3-point rating scale (0–2).

2.3. Procedure

Prospective participants were given a letter, explaining the purpose of the study, inviting them to participate, and asking for parental permission. Pupils for whom informed consent was obtained filled out the questionnaires collectively during school hours, both at baseline and after a three-month follow-up period. Ethical approval was obtained from the local research Ethics Committee.

2.4. Missing data analysis

Participants with and without complete data were compared using Little's (1988) Missing Completely At Random test. This test was not significant, suggesting that missing values could be reliably estimated ($\chi^2(35) = 43.94$). Therefore, to minimize bias associated with attrition and missing data (Schafer & Graham, 2002), we used the expectation maximization (EM) algorithm available in SPSS 20 to impute scale-based missing data at T2. This enabled us to perform all analyses on the full sample of 371 participants.

3. Results

3.1. Confirmatory factor analyses

The internal structure of the 11-item subset of CRQ items was investigated using confirmatory factor analysis. The hypothesized two-factor model (6 'co-brooding' and 5 'co-reflection' items) was compared to a one-factor model (11 'co-rumination' items). Both models showed good fit to the data: $\chi^2(44) = 143.73$, CFI = .98 for the one-factor model, and $\chi^2(43) = 130.48$, CFI = .98 for the two-factor model. However, the two-factor model performed significantly better than the one-factor model, $\chi^2\text{-diff}(1) = 13.25$, $p < .001$. Also, only for the two-factor model, RMSEA was below .08 (i.e., .077 versus .081 for the one-factor model).

3.2. Descriptive analyses

Means, standard deviations, and internal consistencies for the total sample and for boys and girls separately are presented in Table 1. Because of the significant sex difference in reflection, co-brooding, and co-reflection scores, sex was included as a covariate in further analyses.

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