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“It could have been worse”: Developmental change in the use of a counterfactual consoling strategy



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ABSTRACT

In two experiments, we investigated developmental change in the use of a counterfactual consoling strategy: “it could have been worse.” In Experiment 1, 8-year-olds, 10-year-olds, 12-year-olds, and adults were presented with two stories in which a character feels bad as the result of an event that could have turned out better or could have turned out worse. Participants were asked what they would say or do to make the characters feel better. The results revealed that the frequency with which participants mentioned a counterfactual consoling strategy increased dramatically with age. In Experiment 2, using the same stories with similar-aged participants, we tested whether providing children with several consoling strategies (rather than asking them to create one) would prompt greater use of a counterfactual consoling strategy. Under these conditions, the 10- and 12-year-olds responded in a manner very similar to that of adults, whereas the 8-year-olds selected a counterfactual consoling strategy less often than participants at any other age. The findings from the two experiments suggest that, up through at least age 12 years, children are less likely than adults to spontaneously apply counterfactual thinking when generating a consoling strategy.

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Introduction

It is common for adults to reflect on “what might have been,” that is, on ways in which an event’s outcome might have been different had a different course of action been taken, a form of cognition referred to as *counterfactual thinking* (Roese, 1997). Roese and colleagues have argued that counterfactual thinking serves two main purposes: a preparative function and an affective function (Roese, 1994, 2008; Roese & Olson, 1995). The preparative function helps us to learn from our mistakes as we imagine what we could have done differently to produce a more positive outcome (upward counterfactual thinking). The affective function, on the other hand, helps us to feel better when an outcome has been less than optimal via imagining how that outcome could have been even worse (downward counterfactual thinking). Because *downward* counterfactual thinking has the potential to mitigate the severity of emotional responses to negative experiences, such thinking may be used as a strategy for both self- and other-consoling (Teigen & Jensen, 2011). The current study was designed to explore the development of the use of this form of consoling.

There has been surprisingly little research even with adults examining the use of a counterfactual-thinking-based consoling strategy. Most previous research on counterfactual thinking has focused on *upward* counterfactual thinking (White & Lehman, 2005), perhaps due to the fact that the majority of counterfactuals following negative events are upward in nature (Roese, 1997). Accordingly, our knowledge about the *affective* function of counterfactual thinking is quite limited compared with its *preparative* function (White & Lehman, 2005). In the one study that has been conducted to examine how counterfactual thinking is used by adults to cope with traumatic events, Teigen and Jensen (2011) found that survivors of natural disasters spontaneously create a large number of *downward* counterfactuals as a means of self-consoling, whereas White and Lehman (2005) emphasized the role of *downward* counterfactual thinking as a strategy for self-enhancement.

The use of a counterfactual-thinking-based consoling strategy depends, of course, on the ability to engage in counterfactual thinking itself. Research has found that children are capable of basic counterfactual thinking by 5 years of age (Beck, Robinson, Carroll, & Apperly, 2006; Harris, German, & Mills, 1996), although it has also been argued that fully adult-like counterfactual thinking does not emerge until early adolescence (Rafetseder & Perner, 2014; Rafetseder, Schwitalla, & Perner, 2013).

The ability to generate a counterfactual consoling strategy also depends on an understanding of counterfactual emotions, more specifically, an understanding of relief. It has been found that although children start to experience regret (relief’s negative mirror emotion) at around the age of 5 (Weisberg & Beck, 2010) or 6 years (Amsel & Smalley, 2000; Burns, Riggs, & Beck, 2012; O’Connor, McCormack, & Feeney, 2012, 2014), it is less clear when children first begin to experience relief. Some studies have found that relief is not experienced until 1 or 2 years after the first experiencing of regret (Amsel & Smalley, 2000; Weisberg & Beck, 2010), whereas a recent study by Weisberg and Beck (2012) found that the two emotions were first experienced at around the same age. It was also found that an explicit understanding of the nature of situations that give rise to these emotions might not emerge until 1 or 2 years after the age at which the emotions themselves are first experienced (Guttentag & Ferrell, 2004).

Anticipating counterfactual emotions and using this ability as an emotion regulation strategy are also instrumental to counterfactual consoling. In a study examining children’s ability to anticipate regret, McCormack and Feeney (2014) found that although children may experience regret by the age of 6 or 7 years, they tend not to anticipate the effects of regret-inducing situational factors before the age of 8 years, whereas Guttentag and Ferrell (2008) similarly found that the anticipation of regret does not emerge until after children first explicitly understand some of the situational factors that contribute to regret.

Given the large literature focusing on the development of sociocognitive skills such as perspective taking, emotion regulation, and the attribution of emotions (Bernard & Deleau, 2007; Boseovski, Lapan, & Bosacki, 2013; Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004; Nadig & Sedivy, 2002; Perry, Swingler, Calkins, & Bell, 2016), and given that children are concerned about others’ well-being from an early age (Hepach, Vaish, & Tomasello, 2012), it is surprising that the literature on children’s use of

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