



Short Communication

The differential impact of brooding and reflection on the relationship between perceived stress and suicide ideation



Ashley B. Cole, LaRicka R. Wingate*, Raymond P. Tucker, Sarah Rhoades-Kerswill, Victoria M. O'Keefe, David W. Hollingsworth

Oklahoma State University, 116 North Murray Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether brooding and reflection moderated the relationship between perceived stress and suicide ideation. It was hypothesized that brooding, but not reflection, would strengthen the effect of perceived stress on suicide ideation above and beyond depression symptoms. Hypotheses were supported. Results suggest the assessment of a brooding response style may help identify clients who are more likely to contemplate suicide when confronted with life stress.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 38,000 individuals complete suicide each year in the United States making suicide the fifth leading cause of death before age 65 (McIntosh & Drapeau, 2012). It is important to detect predictors of suicide to prevent deaths by suicide from occurring. Suicide ideation is a critical predictor of death by suicide (Palmer, 2004), and it is essential to examine the specific role risk factors have on suicide ideation.

Stress is a prominent contributor to the experience of depression symptoms (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). The diathesis–stress model suggests all people have some level of predisposing factors for psychopathology; however, whether an individual develops a disorder depends on the interaction between the degree to which risk factors exist and the degree of stress experienced (Ingram & Luxton, 2005). Moreover, this model posits that when predisposing vulnerabilities are activated by stress, a psychological disorder may develop (Morrison & O'Connor, 2008b). Rumination is a specific cognitive vulnerability identified in the psychopathology literature (Morrison & O'Connor, 2008b).

The Response Styles Theory of rumination suggests rumination involves responding to stress with focused attention to negative aspects of emotional states (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991). The theory posits that ruminators focus on the causes and consequences of negative events, resulting in a negative affect (Hyde, Mezulis, & Abramson, 2008). Rumination is a cognitive vulnerability for both depression (Cox, Funasaki, Smith, & Mezulis, 2012) and suicide ideation (Morrison & O'Connor, 2008b). Two identified components of rumination are brooding and reflection (Trenor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). Both components involve the cognitive process of self-focused attention; however, their content differs. Brooding is defined as focusing on negative, self-blaming, gloomy, or anxious thoughts. In contrast, reflection refers to contemplation and an attempt to deal with and overcome one's problems (Trenor et al., 2003). Research has consistently demonstrated that brooding is associated with high rates of depression symptoms, but the relationship between reflection and depression symptoms is inconsistent in the literature (Burwell & Shirk, 2007; Trenor et al., 2003).

As rumination and stress are both conceptually related to negative affect, research has investigated their relationship on negative mental health outcomes. Cox et al. (2012) found rumination interacted with stress to prospectively predict depression symptoms; however, the relationship between rumination, stress, and depression was found only for brooding. Brooding moderated the relationship between stress and depression for nearly all stress

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 (405) 744 2988; fax: +1 (405) 744 8067.

E-mail addresses: abcole@okstate.edu (A.B. Cole), laricka.wingate@okstate.edu (LaRicka R. Wingate), raymopt@ostatemail.okstate.edu (R.P. Tucker), sarhoad@ostatemail.okstate.edu (S. Rhoades-Kerswill), victomo@ostatemail.okstate.edu (V.M. O'Keefe), david.hollingsworth@okstate.edu (D.W. Hollingsworth).

domains. This finding provides support that the components of rumination function differently in interacting with stress to predict depression symptoms.

In a systematic review of rumination and suicide, 10 out of 11 studies found that rumination was associated with suicide ideation and/or behavior, and only three of the studies examined both brooding and reflection (Morrison & O'Connor, 2008b). One of these three studies found significantly higher levels of reflection among non-suicidal individuals compared to those who had previously attempted suicide, suggesting a protective effect of reflection (Crane, Barnhofer, & Williams, 2007). The other two studies yielded mixed results for reflection, as a study by Miranda and Nolen-Hoeksema (2007) found reflection to be predictive of suicidality, while a study by O'Connor and Noyce (2008) found brooding, but not reflection, predicted increased suicide ideation.

This study aimed to expand on previous findings by investigating the relationship between stress and suicide ideation using a two-factor model of rumination. Defining rumination as a non-unitary construct has led to further investigation of which component may be potentially more maladaptive (Cox et al., 2012). Because research suggests the components of rumination may function differently in relation to depression (Treyner et al., 2003), they may also function differently in relation to suicide ideation and stress. Previous findings indicated that psychiatric inpatients' level of brooding, but not reflection, was significantly associated with their suicide attempt history (Grassia & Gibb, 2009). Additionally, compared to levels of reflection, brooding was more strongly related to inpatients' history of suicide attempts, and this relationship was significant after controlling for gender and depression symptoms (Grassia & Gibb, 2009). Guided by these findings, it was hypothesized that brooding, but not reflection, would significantly moderate the relationship between perceived stress and suicide ideation above and beyond depression symptoms.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 360 undergraduate students, 239 (66.4%) females and 121 (33.6%) males recruited from a large Midwestern university. Participants were granted course credit for participation and completed all study materials online. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 56 ($M = 19.72$). This sample contained 286 (79.4%) Caucasians, 25 (6.9%) American Indians, 18 (5.0%) African Americans, 14 (3.9%) Asian Americans, eight (2.2%) Biracial individuals, seven (1.9%) Hispanic/Latinos, one (.3%) who identified as "other," and one (.3%) declined to state ethnicity.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics questionnaire

Participants completed a demographics questionnaire that assessed for age, sex, and ethnicity.

2.2.2. Ruminative Response Styles (RRS)

The RRS (Treyner et al., 2003) is a 22-item self-report measure that assesses the frequency of rumination. The items are rated on a Likert-type scale where answers range from one (never) to four (always) on how often participants think or do each response when feeling down, sad, or depressed. The measure has two subscales that assess for Brooding (e.g., "What am I doing to deserve this?" and "Why can't I handle things better?") and Reflection (e.g., "Analyze recent events to try to understand why you are depressed" and "Go someplace alone to think about your feelings"). The RRS demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

2.2.3. Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)

The PSS (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) is a 14-item self-report measure that assesses the extent to which an individual views their current life situations (in the past month) as stressful. Responses on the PSS range from zero (never) to four (very often), with higher scores indicating greater stress. Example items include "How often have you felt nervous and 'stressed'?" and "How often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?" The PSS demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .81$).

2.2.4. Hopelessness Depressive Symptom Questionnaire-Suicidality Subscale (HDSQ-SS)

The HDSQ-SS (Metalsky & Joiner, 1997) is a four-item self-report measure that assesses the frequency and intensity of suicide ideation and impulses within the past two weeks. Scores on each item range from one to four, with higher scores signifying more severe suicide ideation. An example item and corresponding ratings include "I do not have thoughts of killing myself" (0); "Sometimes I have thoughts of killing myself" (1); "Most of the time I have thoughts of killing myself" (2); and "I always have thoughts of killing myself" (3). The HDSQ-SS demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

2.2.5. Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D)

The CES-D (Radloff, 1977) is a 20-item self-report questionnaire that assesses symptoms of depression experienced within the last week. The CES-D uses a four-point Likert-type scale where scores range from zero (rarely or none of the time) to three (most or all of the time). Example items include "I felt depressed" and "I felt lonely." Higher scores are indicative of greater depression symptoms. The CES-D demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .81$).

3. Results

Zero-order correlation analyses demonstrated brooding, reflection, perceived stress, and suicide ideation were significantly positively associated. Descriptive statistics, correlations, and variable ranges are reported in Table 1. These results are in line with previous research that found positive associations between rumination, perceived stress, and suicide ideation (Morrison & O'Connor, 2008a) (see Table 2).

3.1. Analyses

Moderation effects of brooding and reflection on the relationship between perceived stress and suicide ideation were tested simultaneously using the moderated moderation approach (Hayes, 2013). Depression and gender were controlled to account for variance unique to suicide ideation. The overall moderated moderation (three-way interaction) model uniquely accounted for 2.21% of the variance, $F(9, 350) = 11.016$, $p < .001$. Specifically,

Table 1
Correlations, means, standard deviations, and possible ranges.

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------|-------|-------|------|------|------|
| 1. Perceived stress | – | | | | |
| 2. Depression | .74* | – | | | |
| 3. Brooding | .75* | .66* | – | | |
| 4. Reflection | .55* | .56* | .72* | – | |
| 5. Suicidal ideation | .30* | .41* | .32* | .30* | – |
| <i>M</i> | 14.68 | 12.46 | 9.18 | 8.06 | 4.21 |
| <i>SD</i> | 6.99 | 10.19 | 3.66 | 3.34 | 1.03 |
| Possible range | 0–56 | 0–60 | 5–20 | 5–20 | 4–16 |

* $p < .001$.

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