

## **The Developmental Origins of Cognitive Vulnerability to Depression: Negative Interpersonal Context Leads to Personal Vulnerability**

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*The articles in this special issue address empirically potential developmental origins of cognitive vulnerability to depression. The findings from these studies converge on the theme that the nature of the interpersonal context within which individuals develop is central to the emergence of cognitive vulnerability versus invulnerability to depression.*

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**KEY WORDS:** cognitive vulnerability; depression; development; interpersonal context.

Cognitive theories of depression have been preeminent among psychological approaches to understanding depression. Cognitive models (e.g., Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Beck, 1967, 1987; Ingram, Miranda, & Segal, 1998; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Rehm, 1977) emphasize the role of maladaptive beliefs, inferential styles, or information processing biases as vulnerability factors for depression that increase people's risk for becoming depressed when they experience stressful life events. Moreover, a growing body of evidence suggests that negative cognitive styles and information processing do, indeed, increase risk for depression (e.g., Abramson et al., 1999; Alloy et al., 1999; Ingram et al., 1998).

If negative cognitive styles do confer vulnerability to depression, then it becomes important to understand the origins of these cognitive styles. Such understanding may lead to the development of early interventions to prevent initial onset and recurrences of depression. What are the developmental antecedents of cognitive vulnerability versus invulnerability to depression? It is this question that the articles in this special issue address. Numerous pathways may contribute to the development of cognitive styles that, in turn, confer risk for depression. For example, parental depression may contribute to the development of depressogenic cognitive styles in their offspring through a variety of mechanisms including genetic transmission or negative parenting practices, among others (e.g., Goodman & Gotlib, 1999). Children may learn their cognitive or information processing styles in part from signifi-

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cant others, such as parents, peers, and teachers. One possible mechanism is that children model the cognitive styles of their parents. In addition to modeling, the feedback parents, peers, or teachers provide to children about their competencies or the appropriate interpretation of negative events in the child's life may contribute to the child's risk for depression. Children may learn, implicitly or explicitly, to make the same judgments about their own competencies or the same inferences about events in their lives as those made by significant others for the children (Abramson et al., 1999; Alloy et al., 1999). Negative parenting practices and a developmental history of maltreatment and neglect may also contribute to individuals' formation of cognitive risk for depression (e.g., Chiariello & Orvaschel, 1995; Rose & Abramson, 1992). Disrupted attachment relationships or family discord have also been proposed as contributors to the development of negative cognitive structures that, in turn, increase risk for depression.

The articles in this special issue address empirically several of these potential developmental precursors of cognitive vulnerability to depression. A recurrent theme of all of the articles is that exposure to a negative interpersonal context of some kind (e.g., negative parenting practices, negative inferential feedback from significant others, early history of maltreatment, negative appraisals of competence from significant others, low intimacy in romantic relationships, family discord or disruption) leads to the development of personal cognitive vulnerability to depression. Although the samples included in these studies vary from children to adolescents to young adults, the results of the studies all converge on this common theme. In addition, all of the studies demonstrate, either directly or by reference to prior work, that the potential cognitive vulnerabilities of interest do, in fact, predict subsequent depressive symptoms or episodes.

In a sample of young adolescents and their mothers, Garber and Flynn report that maternal history of depression is associated longitudinally with low self-worth, negative attributional style, and hopelessness in offspring. Moreover, low maternal acceptance, negative maternal attributional feedback for child-focused events, and stressful life events incremented the prediction of adolescents' negative cognitions beyond maternal depression. The importance of significant others' appraisals and feedback is also demonstrated in the study by Cole, Jacquez, and Maschman. In a 4-year longitudinal study, Cole et al. find that elementary school children's self-appraisals of competence in five developmentally important domains are significantly predicted by parents', teachers', and peers' appraisals in the same domains.

Continuing this theme, in a sample of college freshmen at high versus low cognitive risk for depression and their parents, Alloy et al. find that high-risk-students' parents communicate more negative attributional and consequence feedback for stressful events in their child's life than do low-risk-students' parents. Relative to low-risk-students' parents, high-risk-students' mothers also have more negative cognitive styles themselves and high-risk-students' fathers show less emotional acceptance and warmth in their parenting. Moreover, both parents' inferential feedback and fathers' parenting styles predicted their undergraduate children's likelihood of developing episodes of depression during a 2.5-year prospective follow-up, mediated totally or in part by the students' cognitive vulnerability. Consistent with the notion of a continuum of emotional rejection, ranging from mildly negative

parenting practices and negative inferential feedback to outright psychological abuse, Gibb et al. find that high-risk students report histories of more emotional, but not physical or sexual, maltreatment than do low-risk students. In addition, a history of emotional maltreatment predicts onset of episodes of depression in the 2.5-year prospective follow-up, mediated totally or in part by students' cognitive risk and hopelessness.

In a short-term longitudinal study of early adolescents and their families, Rudolph, Kurlakowsky, and Conley report that family disruption in the form of parental loss or separation, interparental conflict involving child-centered content and self-blame, and parental rejection all predict low self-perceptions of control in adolescents as well as helpless behavior as rated by the adolescents' teachers. Recent stress in the form of school hassles, chronic strains, and role disruptions also predict adolescents' maladaptive control beliefs and behaviors. In an experimental design, Williams, Connolly, and Segal show that low intimacy in adolescent girls' romantic relationships is associated with cognitive reactivity to a negative mood induction. Finally, Ingram provides a cogent integration of the six empirical studies contained in this special issue.

The contributors to this special issue have provided important data and perspectives on the developmental origins of cognitive vulnerability to depression. The findings from these studies converge on the idea that the nature of the interpersonal context within which individuals develop is central to the emergence of cognitive vulnerability versus invulnerability to depression. Future research will need to delineate more specifically the mechanisms and timing of these effects. This special issue should provide a solid empirical and conceptual basis for such endeavors.

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