Is pessimism a risk factor for depressive mood among community-dwelling older adults?

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Abstract

This study examined two senses in which pessimism might be a risk factor for depressive mood among older adults. The first was that a pessimistic explanatory style would predict changes toward depressive mood when combined with stressful life events. The second was that predictive pessimism, or thinking that bad events will happen in the future, would predict changes in depressive symptoms. We found an interaction between explanatory style and life stressors, but it was the optimists who were at higher risk for depressive symptoms after negative life events. We also found support for predictive pessimism, however, as a predictor of depressive symptoms over time. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Explanatory style theory posits that a pessimistic way of explaining the causes of life events is a risk factor for depression (Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Despite two decades of research demonstrating that pessimism, defined as a tendency to explain negative events with internal, stable and global causes (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978), is indeed related to the development of depressive symptoms in children and young adults, this prediction has not been tested in community-dwelling older adults. The primary goal of this study was therefore to measure explanatory style in this older population, and to determine whether pessimism is a prospective risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms in older adults. In contrast to some theoretical work (Gatz, Kasl-Godfrey & Karel, 1996) which claims that psychological risk factors for

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depression might become less important as people get older, we hypothesized that pessimistic explanatory style would indeed predict increases in depressive symptoms in this age group.

Whereas the explanatory style approach to pessimism and its opposite, optimism, has not previously been extended into old age, several other approaches to optimism have been used with older samples. These include dispositional optimism (Mroczek, Spiro, Aldwin, Ozer & Bossé, 1993) and personal optimism (Reker, 1997; Reker & Wong, 1985). We believe that, despite their different measurement instruments, these other approaches to optimism share a focus on expectations for the future, in contrast to the explanatory style approach's measurement of attributions for past events. Recent research has found explanatory style to be moderately correlated with more future-oriented measures of pessimism (Hjelle, Belongia & Nesser, 1996), but it nonetheless seemed important to evaluate these two constructs separately in our longitudinal analyses. Instead of selecting among possible approaches and related instruments measuring hypothetical future events, we decided to take a more real-life approach to pessimistic predictions by using events actually expected to occur in the near future. The second hypothesis of our study was therefore that pessimistic predictions for actual negative life events in the near future would predict depression.

Timing of measurement is critical in prospective longitudinal studies such as this one. Our hypotheses require a period of time during which significant life events may happen for many older adults. The most comprehensive project on life events in community-dwelling older adults used six month testing intervals to maximize recall accuracy, and found that many participants in their large sample experienced several life events over the course of six months (Murrell, Norris & Hutchins, 1984). Therefore, six-month intervals appeared to be appropriate for testing interactions involving life events, and we tested the interaction of explanatory style and life events at six month and one-year follow-up. In contrast, we considered predictive pessimism to be independent of actual life events experienced, suggesting that we should test the hypothesis over a brief period such as one month during which few life events will have occurred. Frese (1992) cautions that the effects of psychological moderator variables may change from short intervals to longer ones. In accordance with this caution, we therefore tested both notions of pessimism over both shorter (one month) and longer (six months and one year) periods to ensure that there were no temporally shifting relationships. Furthermore, we note that our concern in this study was with the prediction of *changes* in depressive symptoms, treating depression as a continuous variable. We now discuss the two notions of pessimism in more detail, with special attention to how these constructs might be important in life-span perspective and how they might have impact on depressive mood in different time frames.

1.1. Pessimistic explanatory style as a predictor of depression

There are two primary reasons that it is critical to extend explanatory style work into the last few decades of the life-span. First, few researchers use theoretical models to test hypotheses concerning depression and affect in late life (see Reker, 1997, for an exception). Second, prevention programs based on explanatory style have prevented depression in at-risk children (Gillham, Reivich, Jaycox & Seligman, 1995). While few examples exist of gerontological research on prevention, it may be an idea whose time has come, especially as this group becomes a much larger part of the American population (Carstensen & Pasupathi, 1993; Gatz, 1995; Murrell & Meeks, 1991). However, it will only make good sense to do prevention in this way if pessimism