



Cognitive vulnerabilities in parents as a potential risk factor for anxiety symptoms in young adult offspring: An exploration of looming cognitive style



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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Given that anxiety runs in families, it is critical to understand the cognitive factors that may be responsible for this intergenerational transmission. The present study offers a first step by exploring the link between mother and father tendencies to view potentially threatening situations as rapidly escalating toward dreaded outcomes (i.e., looming cognitive style) and the emotional disturbances and looming cognitive styles of their adult offspring.

Methods: We assessed cognitive vulnerabilities, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in a non-clinical sample (N = 382) of Italian college students and their parents.

Results: The looming cognitive style of fathers, but not mothers, was significantly related to greater anxiety in adult offspring. This finding was obtained for both sons and daughters, and remained even after statistically controlling for the anxiety, worry, depressive symptoms, and anxiety sensitivity (AS) of parents). Notably, the association between fathers' looming cognitive style and offspring symptoms was not related to their child's depressive symptoms, and similar to prior work, served as a cognitive marker specific to anxiety.

Limitations: The present study relied on a cross-sectional design and did not use clients diagnosed with anxiety disorders.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that it may prove fruitful to consider parental vulnerabilities such as looming cognitive styles in comprehensive cognitive and interpersonal models of anxiety. The intergenerational transmission of emotional difficulties seems to extend beyond anxiety to beliefs about the escalation of threat.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Intergenerational transmission of anxiety

Anxious parents tend to have anxious children (Rapee, 2012; Turner, Beidel, & Costello, 1987). These effects, known as intergenerational transmission, have important consequences for the offspring of anxious parents because childhood anxiety is often protracted into adolescence and later life. Only about 50% of the co-occurrence of parental and child anxiety is explained by genetic

factors (Eley & Gregory, 2004); thus, researchers are increasing their attention to psychological factors that influence the intergenerational transmission of anxiety (e.g., Craske, 1999; Dadds & Roth, 2001; Fox, Henderson, Marshall, Nichols, & Ghera, 2005; Krohne, 1990; Rapee, 2012; Vasey & Dadds, 2001; Wood, McLeod, Sigman, Hwang, & Chu, 2003).

1.2. Parental cognitive vulnerabilities as a potential risk factor

Recent conceptual models of anxiety argue that parents who are at greater risk for anxiety because of specific cognitive vulnerabilities might also place their offspring at greater risk (e.g., Ouimet, Gawronski, & Dozois, 2009). For example, parents with more dysfunctional schematic beliefs might model more extreme ways of

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thinking, reacting and coping with potential danger for their children (e.g., Mogg & Bradley, 1998). Moreover, such parents may create threatening household climates that could make their children more anxious, as well as make them more cognitively vulnerable to anxiety. This notion of parental influence is consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning model and Rachman's (1977) critical analysis of the fear conditioning theory, which would imply that faulty parental modeling, and communication of maladaptive danger-related cognitions, leads children to be susceptible to anxiety problems.

Understanding the impact of parental cognitive vulnerability factors for anxiety holds promise in increasing understanding of factors that put the children of anxious parents at greater risk for anxiety — and opportunities for refined assessment, early prevention, and treatment, of childhood anxiety. Despite these compelling reasons for examining parental cognitive vulnerability to anxiety, only a handful of studies have been conducted, with mixed results.

A primary hypothesis of cognitive vulnerability models is that it is necessary to identify *disorder-specific* vulnerability factors to explain why people develop anxiety as opposed to depressive problems (Clark & Beck, 2010; Clark, 1997; Riskind & Alloy, 2006). In the present study, we examined the relationship between parental looming cognitive style (or LCS; Riskind, Williams, Gessner, Chrosniak, & Cortina, 2000) and offspring anxiety because LCS is a negative cognitive style that has one of the best documented records of cognitive specificity to anxiety (Riskind, Williams, & Joiner, 2006). The theoretical logic of LCS is that when individuals encounter a potential threat, a primary question asked is whether threats are approaching and escalating quickly, and in turn, whether it is unsafe to put off dealing with the potential threats. When threats are static or dissipating with time, anxiety tends to taper off. People with an elevated LCS possess a generalized, trait-like tendency to interpret and perceive ambiguous threats as rapidly approaching and increasing over prior levels such that the proximity, probability, and urgency of taking action are tending to become greater over time (Riskind et al., 2000).

1.3. Parental looming cognitive style as a potential risk factor

There is evidence to support the validity of the LCS. For example, research has shown that the LCS is associated with a schematic processing bias in the form of interpretative and memory biases for threat cues (Riskind et al., 2000), and the LCS predicts maladaptive coping responses to threat, including immobilizing freezing reactions in response to threat (Riskind et al., 2016) and stress generation (Riskind, Black, & Shahar, 2010). Importantly, the LCS has been shown to be relatively specific to anxiety symptoms and disorders with minimal or relatively low association with depressive symptoms and disorders (Reardon & Williams, 2007; Riskind et al., 2000; Riskind & Williams, 2005; Riskind et al., 2006). Prospective studies have found that the LCS predicts increases in anxiety symptoms, worry, and OCD symptoms but not depression symptoms over time (Adler & Strunk, 2010; Elwood, Riskind, & Olatunji, 2011; González-Díez, Calvete, Riskind, & Orue, 2015; Riskind, Tzur, Williams, Mann, & Shahar, 2007; Sica, Caudek, Chiri, Ghisi, & Marchetti, 2012). In addition, several studies have shown that the LCS independently predicts anxiety and related syndromes when anxiety sensitivity and/or intolerance of uncertainty are controlled (Elwood et al., 2011; Reardon & Williams, 2007; Riskind et al., 2007).

Other popular cognitive vulnerabilities in the anxiety literature have less clear support for their specificity to anxiety. For example, there is evidence that anxiety sensitivity is a transdiagnostic vulnerability factor (Naragon-Gainey, 2010; Reardon & Williams,

2007; Schmidt, Zvolensky, & Maner, 2006). Likewise, studies have indicated that intolerance of uncertainty appears to be a common factor shared by anxiety and depression (Hong & Cheung, 2014; Paulus, Talkovsky, Heggeness, & Norton, 2015).

Given the evidence that LCS is a cognitive vulnerability specific to anxiety, it is plausible that parental LCS is etiologically linked to the intergenerational transmission of anxiety. This could occur for several reasons. Fathers and mothers with heightened LCS may verbally or behaviorally communicate, or model, exaggerated perceptions of danger to their children. In addition, LCS, which is theorized to be a broader cognitive vulnerability construct than interpretative biases (Riskind et al., 2000; Riskind & Williams, 2005), is highly predictive of interpretative biases on a homophone and word-stem completion task and memory biases for pictorial threat stimuli (Riskind et al., 2000). A number of studies suggest that parents with interpretative biases for threat are likely to have children who are anxious (Creswell & O'Connor, 2006; Gifford, Reynolds, Bell, & Wilson, 2008). Since parents with interpretative biases are likely to have children who are more anxious, parents with LCS may also be likely to have anxious children.

1.4. Potential parental differences

In this study, we also examined a related question: Do fathers and mothers with heightened LCS have differential influences on their offspring? Relatively little is known about ways in which fathers and mothers differ in their impact on children, particularly in reference to their cognitive vulnerabilities (Bögels & Brechman-Toussainas, 2006). A possible reason for this knowledge gap is that prior studies examining cognitive factors in the intergenerational transmission of anxiety have primarily focused on mothers and young children (Van der Bruggen, Stams, & Bögels, 2008). However, it seems imperative to examine parental factors to better understand possible mechanisms in intergenerational transmission.

1.5. Other potential factors that were controlled

To adjust for other parental characteristics in this study that might influence offspring anxiety, we controlled for parental anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as another two cognitive factors related to anxiety - anxiety sensitivity and trait worry. Anxiety sensitivity (or AS) is a well-documented cognitive style that pertains to fears of anxiety-related symptoms that are interpreted as having catastrophic harmful consequences (Reiss & McNally, 1985; Taylor, 1999). Anxiety sensitivity is thought to play a central role in the onset and maintenance of several anxiety disorders (e.g., Bernstein & Zvolensky, 2007; Li & Zinbarg, 2007; Reiss, 1991; Schmidt et al., 2006; Taylor, 1999). Several studies have examined whether parental anxiety sensitivity is associated with offspring anxiety. In one study, East, Berman, and Stoppelbein (2007) found that fathers (but not mothers) with elevated anxiety sensitivity were more likely to have anxious, college student offspring. In another study of adolescents at risk for drug abuse, however, Pollack et al. (2002) found that fathers and mothers who were higher in anxiety sensitivity were no more likely than other parents to have anxious offspring.

As for trait worry, although it is not traditionally identified as a cognitive vulnerability, it is characterized by a chronic predisposition to engage in repetitive and largely lexical (or verbal) negative thinking patterns and is associated with negative affect and feelings of uncontrollability (Borkovec, Alcaine, & Behar, 2004). Borkovec has argued that trait worry serves a function for the avoidance of intense fearful images, and bodily sensation of fear, as well as to prevent or control uncertain negative outcomes. Since trait worry is

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